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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.
MAGAZINE
NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

JULY, 1966 Vol. 1, No. 6

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE GHOST RIDERS AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Baffled, U.N.C.L.E. faces the deadly riddle of the sleek luxury liner which sped off into the dark on schedule—and vanished from the face of the earth! Follow Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin in this, their most danger-packed adventure of all. It's a story you'll never forget! . . . . . 2 to 57

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The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

THE GHOST RIDERS AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Deep inside the Earth a blind, gasping madman had marshalled a monstrous army of Evil, as Solo and Illya race against time and cruel odds to face THRUSH's most incredible death plot of all.

ACT I
INCIDENT OF THE STOLEN TRAIN

PROTECTED by every safety device known, the Central Chieftain flashed through the night, racing against time between Pittsburgh and Chicago.

"Care to sign these letters now, Mr. Howell? They're urgent."

Harrison Howell glanced up from the plush luxury of his custom-built sleeping car. Accompanied by two male secretaries, a French chef, and a guard supplied by Protection, Inc., Howell waved

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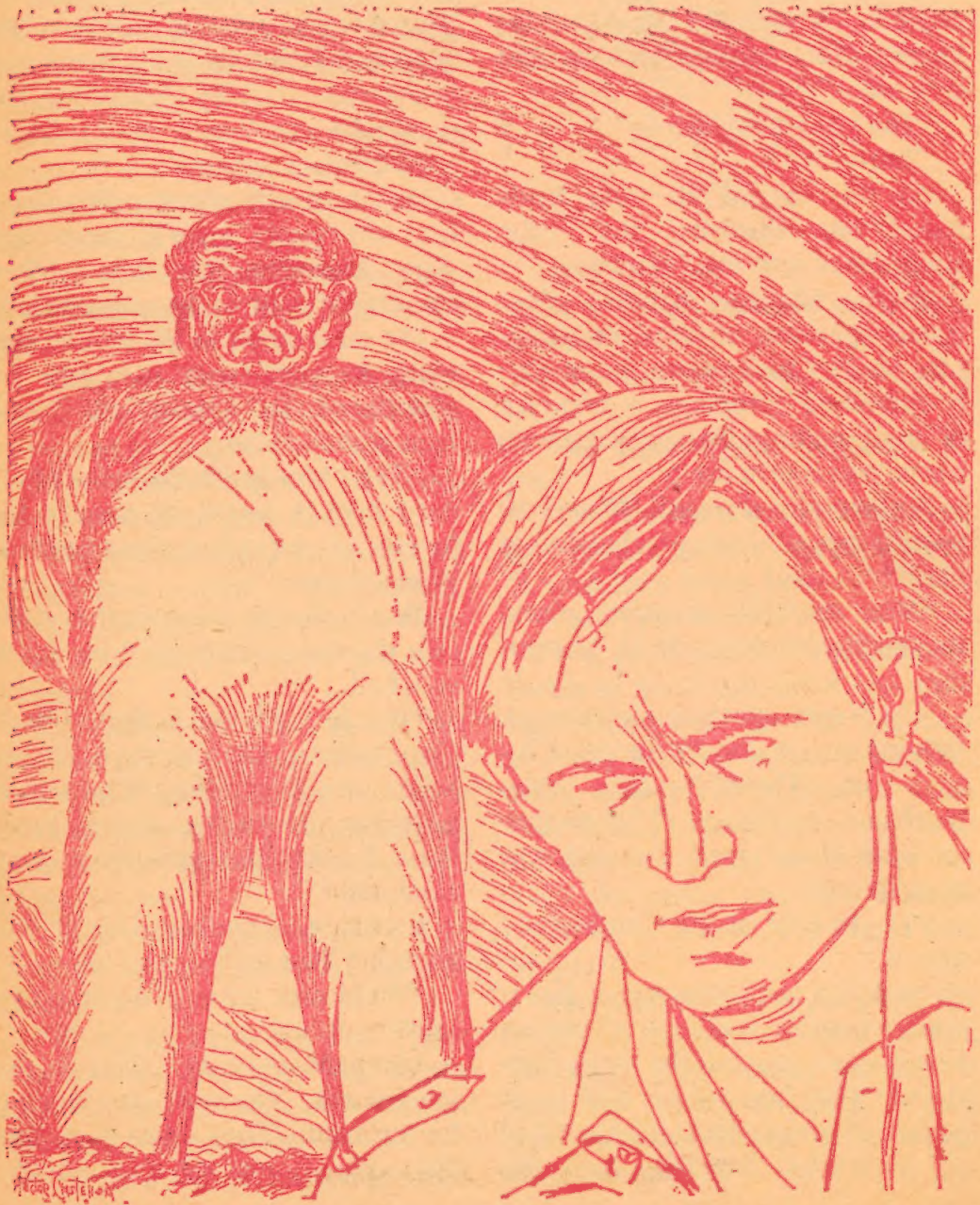
FEATURING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN



the secretary aside. "I'll get to them before we reach Chicago."

Stout, in his fifties, accustomed to being obeyed unquestionably, Howell smiled. "Got involved in this geology book written by Dr. Leonard Finnish before he disappeared.—A man I'd liked to have known, since geology was my first interest—"

"But your letters, sir—"

"Later."

At this instant all train lights flared out, throwing the entire streamliner into total darkness.

In the Chicago dispatch office bored operators checked the progress of the Chieftain on the brightly illumined computer, a complex of multi-colored lights, each bulb a vital message in itself.

An operator shouted, "The computer's flipped! Get a technician in here!"

Other operators crowded around the suddenly dark, silent computer.

The awed operator stammered, "Lights out on the Pittsburgh-Chicago run. Three hundred miles southeast of Chicago. The computer clicked off as if the trip was completed."

"Try to contact the Chieftain by phone."

And it wasn't too many hours later when the nation's afternoon newspapers carried the incredible story: The impossible had happened. A streamliner disappeared off its tracks, vanishing from the face of the earth, with all passengers and crew.

TWO

HUNDREDS of miles west, in the Sawtooth Mountain ranges of Wyoming, a rail-thin cowpuncher in battered Stetson, dusty levis and boots rode dazedly downslope toward the ranchyard of the Maynard Cattle company.

At the ranchhouse people spilled into the yard. They'd spent two days searching for him. They shouted at him as he approached.

He sat straight in his saddle, but when he came near they saw he was dazed. He almost fell. Three men grabbed him.

"Take him inside," Carlos Maynard said. A heavy-set man in his forties, his florid face was troubled. "Get a doctor."

Ranch hands carried the rider into the house and laid him down on a bed.

Four hours later, a doctor from Cripple Bend settlement shook his head over the rider. "Can't find anything physically wrong with Pete. Looks like exhaustion and exposure."

Carlos Maynard stared at the doctor. "That all you can tell me?"

"What else do you want me to say?"

Maynard scowled. "This is the second man I've sent out looking for my cattle. They come back like this—dazed, out of their heads.

Don't know where they've been. You find nothing wrong. Only they can't tell me where they were, or what's happened to more than one thousand head of Santa Gertrudis cattle."

The doctor shook his head. "Let Pete sleep. Maybe when he wakes up he can remember what happened."

Awaking after ten hours of sleep, Pete Wasson found Maynard sitting beside the bed. "What happened up there, Pete?"

Pete stared around the roughly-furnished room. "How did I get here?"

"Come on, Pete! Three days ago I sent you looking for Marty Nichelson and my cattle—"

"Three days?" Pete's eyes clouded. "I been gone three days?"

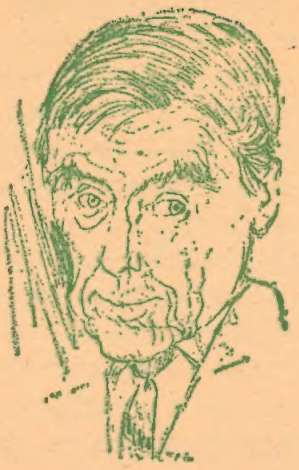
Maynard managed to control his indignation and puzzlement. "Right. My cattle have been missing a week now. Did you find even a trace?"

Pete drew his hand across his eyes. "Nothing, boss. They just vanished like clouds, not leaving a track! I remember I kept thinking it was like that song about the ghost riders—"

"That's enough senseless talk, Pete! I want to know where my cattle are!"

"That's all I can tell you. There was a clear trail just like Marty said, up into the Sawtooth ranges. Then the trail just stopped."

"You loco? A thousand head of



cattle have got to leave some kind of trail!"

"These didn't, boss. That's all I know."

"All right. What happened to you?"

Pete Wasson stirred on the bed, face gray, almost afraid to answer. "I must have fallen, boss—"

"Don't you *know?*"

"No, sir, I don't. It's all cloudy. Seems to me a rain came up, and I was looking for trail. Got this kind of funny feeling—a headache like, dizzy, sick at my stomach. I must have fallen, hit my head on a rock. I remember riding down here toward the ranch, and then I woke up in here. That's all I know, Mr. Maynard."

Maynard walked to the door. He stared at the dudes sitting around the huge front room, waiting to hear the verdict on Pete. A pall had shrouded the ranch for more than a week.

Not only was Maynard losing cattle but the tourists were getting edgy, leaving, as though the ranch were haunted. Well, that didn't make sense. But then, neither did the loss of a thousand head of cattle!

"Maybe somebody's trying to put you out of business, Mr. Maynard," Marty Nichelson said. The young cowboy sat beside Pete's bed. "I can't tell you any more than Pete has. Not even as much. Like he said, I got this headache, too, but I know how sore you were going to be, losing all those cattle and no trace, so I kept riding. This headache got worse, and I got so sick I headed into Cripple Bend."

"And spent three days on a drunk!" Maynard accused him.

Marty winced and nodded. "I don't know what happened, boss. It was like I was sick—"

"Drunk!"

"But first I was sick. And fouled up. Them cattle just walking off the face of the earth didn't make sense. I decided a couple of drinks might help.

"Next thing I knew, you said I'd been gone three days. I wish I could help you, but I can't tell you any more than Pete did."

Maynard growled. "Pete hasn't told me anything! But somebody's going to!"

Newspaper headlines, television cameras and radio newsmen sped the story around the world: 1000 CATTLE MISSING WITHOUT TRACE.

* * *

ILLYA KURYAKIN walked silently down the gleaming length of the long streamliner.

Behind Illya five Central trainmen and special detectives watched him, but Illya ignored them.

He paused at the special car which had been added to the regular Chieftain run, making this an extra replica of the train which had vanished.

The small sender-receiver crackled in his hand. Alexander Waverly's voice spoke as if the United Network Command officer were at Illya's shoulder. "Did you find something, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya grinned faintly from beneath corn-yellow hair.

"Why are you smiling?" This was Solo's voice from the small speaker.

"Because I'm on your candid camera," Illya said.

"Yes. And you will be," Alexander Waverly told him. "We will attempt to keep this train on camera as long as we can."

"Do you pick up the bleep signal?" Illya asked.

"Loud and clear," Solo answered. It was as if they were not in the command office at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters but were nearer than the train detectives. Still, Illya had a sense of being alone that he could not explain and could not escape.

A slender, Slavic blond man, he was no stranger to peril. Congeni-

tally a loner, he liked solitary assignments.

It seemed to onlookers that he was like a machine. At moments like this nothing existed for him except the assigned task. He'd been born in a country where freedom was taxed and strained and sometimes betrayed; he had learned to despise evil in whatever guise it appeared, to fight it wherever he found it.

Now, Illya felt as if he might be embarking on more than a routine train ride from Pittsburgh to Chicago, his latest assignment from U.N.C.L.E.—the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

"You look a little green around the gills," he heard Napoleon Solo saying, knowing that Solo stood beside Waverly in the command room, watching him on closed-circuit television.

"Poor camera work," Illya said casually.

But inwardly, Illya admitted that Solo was perceptive. The unexplained disappearance of a sleek modern streamliner from its tracks belonged to the ghostly unknown, the kind of fantastic stories Illya Kuryakin had heard from superstitious natives in his early childhood.

His mind was coldly analytical, and he had no patience for fantasy. Yet not even the coldest mind could deny that a train, exactly like this one, had vanished, and with it every soul aboard. And without leaving a trace.

It was as if Alexander Waverly read Illya's thoughts. The receiver crackled as Waverly spoke: "We may not be able to follow the entire run by televised picture, Illya, but no matter where your train goes, you'll send back a radio bleep. Don't worry—we'll follow you all the way."

The conductor said, "We're ready to roll now, Mr. Kuryakin, if you are."

Illya waved his arm and nodded. He swung aboard the custom-made sleeper that was a precise duplicate of the car in which billionaire philanthropist Harrison Howell had ridden into nothingness.

The sleek streamliner glided along the tracks. Illya prowled the richly appointed car.

"Do you take well to being a rich man, Illya?" Solo inquired via the speaker.

"I was born a billionaire at heart," Illya answered. "I thought you knew."

There was no reply from the command room in New York. Illya turned up the volume on the sender-receiver. "Something gone wrong, Solo?"

Still there was no answer. Illya shook the receiver. The line between him and the command room was open. He was certain of it. There was the urgent crackle, yet neither Solo nor Waverly spoke.

Illya said, "Solo. Answer, please.

Waverly. This is Mayday. Come in, please."

The speaker crackled in his hand. Holding his breath, Illya waited, but no one spoke.

He pressed the sending button. "Come in. Come in. Can you read the bleep-message?"

As if distantly, Illya heard Solo's voice. But Solo was speaking to Waverly, not to Kuryakin: "Can they locate the source of the interference, sir?"

Then Illya heard Waverly, voice sharply impatient: "Negative."

"We better tell Illya the problem," Solo suggested.

"Yes!" Illya spoke loudly into the sender.. "Somebody be kind enough to tell me what's going on."

Alexander Waverly's voice came into the private car clearly: "Slight problem here, Illya, but it should not be a major obstacle. Temporarily at least, we've lost the televised picture. When the train got under way, some interference was set.

"We're getting nothing but a jumbled pattern at the moment. We're working on it. Meantime, I assure you the bleep is coming in strong. We're following every mile of your trip. As soon as we get the picture back, we'll let you know. Meantime, I'm sure I don't have to caution you to remain alert."

Illya stood motionless in the private car aisle.

He looked around at the luxurious appointments. Everything was arranged for the animal comfort of men of wealth and power. Men like Harrison Howell.

Howell had been poor in his youth. He'd worked his way through school, majoring in geology. His first job had been with an oil company. Now his holdings in oil ringed the earth.

Illya shook his head. When the train bearing Howell had vanished, U.N.C.L.E. had made a routine check into his background, trying to find some hidden evil. The computers found none. Howell had indulged himself, making all the wishful dreams of an under-privileged boy come true, but he had been honest, hard-working, unselfish, patriotic, in no way linked with subversive factions such as THRUSH.

Illya prowled the car. He had searched his own mind for some logical explanation, and had found none.

Assigned to this trip by Alexander Waverly, he had not held much hope for its success.

Now, alone in this car, he could not shake a sense of unexplained, mounting tension.

"Keep busy, Illya," he told himself aloud, for no better reason than that hearing his own voice was reassuring in the eerie silence as the streamliner raced west through the night.

He checked over his own arsenal of latest U.N.C.L.E.-designed gimmicks for communication and self-protection. The machine pis-

tol that assembled from lightweight parts that served other purposes as well. The small button in his lapel that transmitted its own "bleep" received only in United Command headquarters.

He moved along the aisle, thinking that he was equipped with the latest inventions, and yet he was on a witch-hunting errand. Could fifteen-car trains actually vanish in this modern world?

He could not rid himself of that rising feeling of something wrong.

What could be wrong? He bent over and stared through the thick windows at the night country whipped past on the hundred-mile an-hour wind drift. Great, rich country, its people sleeping in security in their beds. The wan lights of a midwest village flared by, then the distant glow of a farm house window.

It was all too normal to support the idea of unearthly disappearance; yet, he waited, tense for the unknown into which this train raced.

At the furbished desk, Illya lifted the intra-train phone, pressed the engine button.

After a moment a man's casual voice spoke, "Engineer."

Illya said, "Kuryakin in the special car."

"You living it up, Mr. Kuryakin?" the engineer asked.

"I don't know," Illya said. "That's what I called you to find out."

The engineer laughed. "If it was any smoother, Mr. Kuryakin, we'd be flying."

Illya replaced the phone, aware that he was less than reassured by the engineer's confidence. A train had disappeared a week ago.

Still, hundreds of trains had covered these same tracks, night and day, before and after that strange disappearance.

The railroad people had made every effort to conceal the loss. Failing this, they'd tried to minimize it while they retraced the known run foot by foot. The railings appeared unaltered; there was nothing to suggest any calamity. It was simply as if the fifteen cars, the special sleeper, and all its people had simply ceased to exist.

"We were called in at United Command," Alexander Waverly had told Illya and Solo in the command room three days earlier, "when world-wide panic might ensue if more publicized agencies were at work. We here at the command have determined to make up an exact duplicate of the vanished

Chieftain, down to the special sleeper in which Harrison Howell rode."

Now, Illya watched the night world skim past in darkness and sudden, quickly lost lights. The duplicate Chieftain had been altered in only one way. Illya himself had installed the United Command bleep-signal which would emanate from this train no matter where it went. These bleeps were being monitored on special receivers in United Network's command room.

Illya smiled. It was as if the entire evil-fighting organization rode this train with him.

Yet why did the hackles rise at the nape of his neck? Why couldn't he escape the sense of an impending wrong so incredible that even the full forces of United Command might be helpless against it?

"These thoughts don't make sense," Illya told himself aloud. "It's just another assignment, like returning a book to the library. And you can handle it."

Nevertheless, the slowing of the train went through him like a sudden electric shock and he lunged for the desk, grabbing up the phone, signaling the engine.

"Engineer."

"What's wrong?" Illya said. "Why are you slowing?"

"Just a water stop, Mr. Kuryakin," the engineer said.

"Why didn't you let me know?"

The engineer's voice sharpened. "You'll find the stop listed, Mr. Kuryakin, if you'd bothered to check the trip pattern."

"How long will we be stopped here?" Illya said.

But there was no answer. The engineer had replaced his receiver.

Abruptly, the train shook like a wet dog, the metal parts grinding and squealing in protest.

The lights flashed out, but came on again immediately.

The train was sinking straight downward. It was not as if it were entering a tunnel, but as though the fifteen cars were being lowered via some kind of elevator!

Illya rushed to the door. He grabbed the knob, turning it. The door was locked.

Illya did not even bother checking it; the door was somehow electronically sealed, as if the door were frozen into its framing.

Heeling around, Illya caught up the nearest heavy object and ran to the windows with it.

He stopped, holding the bar aloft, useless. It was heavy enough to break the thick glass, but beyond them were walls of solid rock like close-pressed subway tunneling.

The train continued to plunge straight downward toward the center of the earth.

Illya jerked the sender-receiver from his jacket pocket. He pressed the button. "Uncle Charley. Come in. Mayday. Come in, Uncle Charley. Acknowledge, please. Over."

There was no sound. The instrument was dead metal in his hand.

He loosed his fingers, letting the small sender slip from his grip to the floor.

The lights flared up and then were doused, putting the car into stygian darkness, a pall of gloom that pressed in hot and thick and suffocating.

THREE

NAPOLEON SOLO stood in the United Network Command Room and stared at the blank screen of the instant-bulletin set.

A kind of creeping helplessness immobilized him.

Other men, of every age and nationality, moved around him, each wearing the same electronic identification badge that he wore, all of them vitally concerned in this latest unnerving disorder that left the world-wide organization impotent and disabled.

Though the others acted, trying to find ways around the crippled machinery, Solo remained staring at that silent screen, as if paralyzed by its sudden failure.

Slender, of medium height, Solo was a warmly handsome young man who might have been a doctor, lawyer, advertising executive, accountant—anything except what he was: a highly-rated precision-trained enforcement agent for what had become the most important secret service agency in the world, the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

Solo pulled his gaze from the lifeless screen, forcing his mind away from the moment when every sound from the Chieftain ceased.

"They reached the water stop," Waverly was saying, reconstructing the final moments of communication. "We lost contact. However, the bleep-signal remained clear for —for how long, Mr. Solo?"

Solo looked up, his face drawn. "The bleep stopped three minutes after the train slowed for the water stop, sir."

"Have they been able to pick it up again?" Waverly asked.

Solo shook his head. "Negative, sir. We have agents on the spot. They report no trace of the train. It did not stop for water, by the way."

Waverly shifted papers on his desk. He scowled, studying the men ringed before him. Slowly, the machines and computers came to life on the walls around him. New coded messages were placed before him.

He said, "There must be no panic. We have had a moment of complete breakdown here. But it is only momentary. There is some logical explanation for this, for all of this. Our communications cannot fail like this, not without some detectable cause. Two fifteen-car streamliner trains cannot vanish off their rails without logical explanation."

Waverly pushed his graying hair

back from his lined forehead. No one in the United Command knew Waverly's exact age. Solo wondered wryly if even the computers could give such information. Contrary to popular belief, the computers were not infallible. Lord help anybody programming Alexander Waverly's age into any United Command machinery!

Waverly's brilliant record in military and intelligence dated back to the first world war. He was one of the five men—of different nations—heading the far-flung operations of United Command. Age was his enemy—and so far Alexander Waverly had been able to walk on its face.

Solo said, "I'm ready to fly out immediately, sir."

Waverly's gaze fixed on him from beneath bushy brows. "Fly out, Mr. Solo? Where?"

Solo glanced at the silent screen of the instant-bulletin. It was his last contact with Illya Kuryakin, somehow seemed his final hope for finding him. "I imagined you'd want me to go out to the place where the second train disappeared, sir."

Waverly shook his head. "Negative."

Solo scowled. "But, sir. Illya was on that train—" He saw the older man's face and stopped.

Waverly nodded. "I assure you, Mr. Solo, we will make every effort to locate Mr. Kuryakin, as well as the two trains which somehow seem to have dissolved into thin air."

"Isn't the place where the train disappeared the place to start looking for Illya?"

"It might seem to be—"

"Before something happens to him."

Waverly's head jerked up. "Just a moment, Mr. Solo. We cannot let emotionalism enter into this, no matter how we might feel about Mr. Kuryakin. Surely I don't have to remind a professional such as you that there are larger issues at jeopardy here."

Solo exhaled heavily. "I'm sorry, sir."

Waverly's voice was flat. "As you yourself stated a few moments ago, we have U.N.C.L.E. agents on the scene where the train was last heard from. None has reported any trace of the lost streamliner. I am aware of the great personal peril Mr. Kuryakin faces at this moment, but these are risks we take—that all of us must be prepared to take.

"I'm sorry, but perhaps the scene of the calamity might not be the best place to begin our search—for either Illya Kuryakin, or the missing trains."

Solo frowned, waiting. He could no longer oppose anything Waverly ordered. He had the same pride and faith in Waverly that he had in the United Command itself.

He waited, knowing that Waverly would send him out of this

chrome, steel and glass office—that no matter what the command, he would try to execute it.

Waverly tapped his unlighted pipe.

"I don't have to spell it out for you, Mr. Solo," he said. "I'm sure the same thought has occurred to both of us."

Solo nodded.

"I know, sir. The pattern has suddenly changed."

He looked out the window, summoning up his thoughts.

"Yes," he said, "Before this it at least was one at a time. Isolated, mysterious disappearances. Buddy Evans, a second-string Red Sox catcher, vanished on his way to spring training. Never seen again. Just went off the face of the earth—and on his way to collect a fat bonus for signing."

Waverly said, "The Jeanne Lynch case. A premiere danseuse with the Sadler Wells ballet. Never showed up for a sold-out performance of *Swan Lake*. Never seen again."

"There were quite a few of them," Solo said.

"Eleven hundred and thirty-six," Waverly said grimly. "Plus three unconfirmed. Most of them were not celebrities, so the cases got no great national notice, Mr. Solo."

Napoleon said, "I see what you mean, sir. It was as though they—whoever they are—had been trying out some devilish abduction plan, testing it on individuals until

they were sure it would work. Now they're sure. Now—an entire train."

Solo sighed. "And tomorrow—God knows."

Alexander Waverly said gravely, "You said 'They—whoever they are.' I think we-er—have a pretty good idea, Mr. Solo. Only one organization in the world would have the audacity, the powerful scope, the sheer tenacity of evil to dare this monstrous thing."

THRUSH!

Neither of them had to say it. The thought hung over them like a deadly, unseen nimbus of doom.

Solo drew a deep breath. "What are my orders, sir?"

Waverly allowed a faint smile. "I'm sending you to the Maynard Ranch in the Sawtooth ranges of Wyoming—"

"The place where the cattle disappeared?"

Waverly nodded. "Without a trace, without a hoof-print, or any other sign."

Solo frowned. "But you said we

had no proof these two incidents were any way related."

"I want you to get that proof."

Solo nodded. "You have some reason to believe there is a link, sir?"

Waverly thumbed through taped reports before him. "We have our computers' estimates that the incidents of missing train and vanished cattle are related." Waverly shrugged. "It's up to you, Solo, because I confess to you that's all we have to go on—the computers and my instinct."

Solo frowned because he'd never heard Waverly make just such a remark before. Waverly eschewed anything unscientific. "Instinct, sir?"

Waverly nodded. "That's how helpless we are, Solo. I'm placing my hopes on instinct now. My instinct tells me that the missing cattle and disappearing trains are all part of the same plan. How? I don't know. Nor does any one, except—THRUSH."

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO stepped out of the station wagon that transported him from the Union Pacific station at Cripple Bend to the Maynard Bar-M Ranch.

A sense of unnatural silence was oppressive in the Wyoming afternoon. The ranchhouse looked to be at least seventy years old, built of fieldstones and mountain spruce, reconditioned with central heating and every luxury for dude ranchers.

It was a working ranch, too, deep in the rocky foothills of the inaccessible Sawtooth mountains.

Carlos Maynard prowled his littered office like a hobbled mustang. He stared at Solo, sitting in a straight chair tilted against the wall.

"It isn't that you aren't welcome here, Solo. You are! A very distinguished visitor, and I'm glad to know somebody is doing something! You're not a cop, are you?"

Solo shrugged. "You have somebody you want arrested, Mr. Maynard?"

The harried rancher grinned despite himself. "No. But maybe I'd feel better if you could make an arrest if we need one."

"First, we better find out what really happened," Solo suggested mildly.

Maynard shrugged. "I'll buy that. You can count on me for all the help I can give you. Only I can tell you, I feel pretty helpless about now."

"We all do."

"I just want you to understand. I'll do anything I can to help you people, but my first interest has got to be getting my cattle back."

Solo watched him. "If we can solve why they disappeared, Mr. Maynard, we should be able to find them."

Maynard nodded. "I hope so.

Frankly, I stand to be ruined. No sense trying to hide that from you. People are scared. Scared to come here. Scared to stay after they do get here. We got some pretty wild rumors going around, I can tell you. Ghost riders. No matter how much I warn the men who work for me to knock off that kind of talk, it persists. And who are we to say? Maybe ghost riders did just drive my cattle out into the sky. They sure didn't leave any tracks behind them."

"Just hang on, Mr. Maynard. I think the ghosts will be real enough, once we track them down."

"I hope so. Because it won't take much more to put me out of business. People come here, and they hear about those cattle. Then they get scared, and they take off! Any way you look at it, I stand to lose. First my customers, and even some of my men are afraid to ride up there in the Sawtooth Mountains. The worst part of it is, I can't blame them."

Solo stood up. "People clearing out fast, eh?"

"Right. They come in, hear some of the stories and the rumors, get scared, and clear out soon as they hear about it."

"Not all of them," Solo said. He walked past the puzzled rancher, grabbed the doorknob and jerked the door open.

A girl sprawled forward into the den. She landed on her knees, awkwardly.

"Why, Miss Finnish!" Carlos stared at her.

The girl caught herself. She stayed a moment on all fours, then got up alone when neither Solo nor Maynard moved to aid her. Her eyes were unafraid.

Solo stared at her. The looks of her were as heady as brandy. From profile to brand new riding boots she was like something tailored by angels. Her shoulder-length hair seemed to have the sun roosting in it, even in the darkened office. She wasn't tall but she looked as if nothing had been stinted in perfect packaging. She wore bucksin skirt, frilly vest, a pale green shirt with matching neckerchief at her throat.

Her cheeks were fiery red. She stared from Solo to Maynard, shaking her head.

She straightened, heeled around and almost ran from the room.

Maynard stood, mouth ajar, staring after her.

Solo couldn't blame him. She even looked exciting going away from you.

"Not all of them are running away from what they can hear," Solo said.

Maynard gazed through the opened door. "Yeah. Mabel Finnish. She arrived here two days after the cattle disappeared. Come to think of it, she's been here ever since. Nothing has scared her away."

"As a matter of fact, she can't

seem to hear enough," Solo suggested.

Maynard didn't answer, only stood, frowning, puzzled.

Pete Wasson went over his story again for Solo.

They sat on the bunkhouse stoop, along with Marty Nichelson and Maynard.

Pete said, "That's right. I rode northwest up into the Sawtooth ranges—"

"There was a pretty clear trail in the foothills," Maynard said. "Then, up in the lava spikes, we lost them. But Pete and Marty are good trackers. We sent Marty up there first, then Pete. But they lost any trace of the cattle."

"Could a flash flood have washed away the tracks?" Solo asked.

"Could have, if there'd been any flash flood," Carlos Maynard said. "But there wasn't any rain. Hasn't been none in weeks. No matter what Pete thinks."

Solo watched the young cowpuncher. "So what happened is, you rode looking for sign—"

"Right. Ought to be able to find sign of some kind of a thousand head—"

"And you fell, cracked your skull?" Solo said. "That's what happened?"

"Yes. I told you. I must have fallen."

"What time was it?" Solo said. "Morning? Afternoon? Late evening?"

Pete scowled, staring at him. He shook his head. "I swear to you, I don't know."

Maynard and Nichelson stared at each other.

Solo said to Pete, "You mind taking off your hat?"

Pete frowned, puzzled. "I don't mind, but why should I?"

Solo shrugged. "Let's just say you're being polite to Miss Finnish out there under that cottonwood tree. She hasn't taken her eyes off us."

Solo heard Maynard's sharp intake of breath. "By golly, there she is. Hanging around. You reckon she can hear what we say?"

Solo shrugged. "She might have some kind of listening device, but it seems to me that she's reading lips."

Maynard swore. "Looks like we better check into her."

"We'll check her out," Solo agreed. "But we better take things in order of importance." He moved his fingers expertly across Pete's scalp.

"What you mean?" Maynard said, watching him check the cowboy's skull.

"We got more urgent matters," Solo said. "Like Pete's scalp."

"What about Pete's scalp?" Maynard whispered.

Even Mabel Finnish under the cottonwood tree appeared to be holding her breath.

"Yeah." Pete straightened. "What you looking for in my head, Solo?"

"If you fell from your horse, and struck your head hard enough to knock yourself out for three days, Pete," Solo said, "shouldn't there be some kind of knot on your skull?"

Pete Wasson stood up slowly. His eyes were thoughtful.

"How about that?" he whispered. "There ain't no knot on my head. Funny. Nobody thought about that."

"What's going on here?" Marty Nichelson said.

"That's what we've got to find out," Solo told him. "Can you tell me anything about your headache —and some of the things you did in Cripple Bend for three days?"

Marty frowned. "Well, nothing's clear, Solo. But that don't mean I'm lying!"

"Me either," Pete said. "Even if there ain't no knot on my head, I ain't lying."

"And I was in Cripple Bend. That ought to be easy enough to prove. People would of seen me there, wouldn't they?"

"Looks like it," Solo agreed. "Meantime, either one of you object to taking a polygraph test?"

"What's that?" Pete asked cautiously.

"A lie detector," Solo said. "I don't think either one of you is lying purposely, but a test might help you."

Marty and Pete stared at each other. Marty shrugged. "I got no objections. It all happened just like I said. It ain't clear to me, but I ain't lying."

"You got one of them lie detectors?" Pete said.

"We can have one by tomorrow," Solo said. "If neither one of you objects."

"Sure," Pete said. "Marty and me are willing. We ain't trying to hide nothing. If one of them things will help get at the truth, I want to know."

FIVE

SOLO PARKED the Maynard Ranch station wagon outside the City Bar on the single street in the settlement at Cripple Bend. The town was the last lingering trace of the old west, but battered cars baked at the curbs instead of workhorses.

He walked into the bar, found it almost deserted in the middle of the morning.

"What can I do for you?" The voice was musical and warm.

Solo was mildly astonished but pleased to find that the cowtown bartender was a woman. She looked to be in her middle twenties, and enough to drive strong men to drink. Her blond hair was brushed upward on her head, piled there in rich waves. Her eyes were like a sparkling wine, glittering with promises. She wore a pastel dress and a fresh apron.

Solo ordered a beer and sat at the bar, turning it in his fingers.

"You're staying at the Maynard

Dude Ranch," the bartender said. "Came from New York. Two suitcases—"

"You don't miss much, do you?"

"April. Name's April Caution." She smiled across the bar. "Small town like this, nobody misses much."

"Guess you'll know Marty Nichelson pretty well, then?"

"Marty? Sure. Everybody knows him. Good kid. Been with Carlos Maynard a couple years. Used to take prize money in rodeos until he cracked his hip."

"Hear he was in here and tied on a real binge—"

"Who? Marty?" April straightened, frowning.

Solo nodded, watching her. "That's the talk," he said. "But it's no secret. Marty was talking about it himself. He was telling me about the three days he spent here in Cripple Bend—most of it here in your place—on a bender. Now I've seen you, I can understand why he stayed for three days."

"There's something wrong here, mister," April Caution said, her face puzzled. She straightened when the door swung open at the street entrance.

Solo glanced across his shoulder, but he was not even astonished to see that Mabel Finnish had entered the tavern.

Mabel didn't speak to him. She went to a table near the bar and sat down.

April said, "Just a minute. We'll kick this around, as soon as I wait on the lady."

"Why don't you come up to the bar, Miss Finnish?" Solo asked. "You won't be so comfortable, but you can hear better."

Mabel Finnish's lovely face flushed, but she did not answer. She ordered a daiquiri. April mixed the rum drunk, delivered it and then came back to the bar, sat on a stool facing Solo.

"I been thinking this thing over, about Marty," she said. "When was he supposed to have tied one on in here?"

"About a week and a half ago," Solo said.

Arpil shook her head. "Oh, no. Not in here. Marty hasn't been in here in over a month."

Solo sat a moment, staring at a wet place on the bar. "But there's been a lot of talk about Marty's being in here. Hasn't anybody from the ranch been in to check on it?"

April shrugged. "What's to check? I tell you Marty hasn't been in here in weeks."

Solo sighed. "Any other tavern in Cripple Bend where he could have been on a prolonged drunk?"

April smiled. "No other place in town to buy liquor. Nearest bar is in the next settlement, and that's over seventy miles away. No. If Marty was on a drunk, he'd have been in here—only I can tell you, he hasn't been in."

A few minutes later, Solo walked out of the City Bar. He paused on

the board walk, stared both ways along the sleepy street. Then he glanced over his shoulder at Mabel, drinking alone at the table inside the tavern.

He strode along the walk, going past the ranch station wagon. He walked beyond the feed store, then stepped around the corner, pressed himself against the adobe wall, waiting.

It was a short wait. He heard Mabel's bootheels clattering on the boards as she half ran in pursuit. She slowed, then stopped, looking around puzzled, a few feet from where Solo stood.

Solo stepped out upon the walk immediately behind Mabel. He caught her arm.

Mabel heeled around. Solo fixed her with an unyielding smile. "Looking for anyone we know, Mabel?"

"Let me go."

"I let you go, but you don't go. Why? Do you find me that fascinating, Miss Finnish?"

Mabel shivered slightly. "I don't find you fascinating at all."

"You disappoint me. I had such high regard for your taste. Tell me, if I'm not your type, why do you follow me around?"

She winced, looked helplessly both ways along the sun-stricken street. "Maybe you just happen to go all the same places I must go."

"An interesting theory. Maybe you can tell me why you want to go all these places where I so inconveniently show up—just ahead of you."

"Need I remind you, Mr. Solo? It's a free country. I can go where I like?"

He continued to smile, coldly. "And let me remind you. Freedom and life are being threatened here. It's no game. I won't play by any rules that will please you. I might even get rough. Now, shall we try again? What are you doing here?"

"Because I heard that one thousand of Mr. Maynard's cattle disappeared without a trace."

"Are you interested in cattle? Or disappearances?"

Mabel's head tilted slightly. "Like everyone else, I heard that two huge trains also disappeared without a trace."

Solo stopped smiling. He shook his head, puzzled. "And that's why you came here?"

She met his gaze levelly. "Doesn't the name Finnish mean anything to you, Mr. Solo?"

Solo frowned, filtering the name through his mind. There was the

faintest stirring of recall. He shook his head. "Should it?"

"Leonard Finnish," she said. "He was a geologist known all over the world. He was my grandfather. He disappeared without leaving a trace."

"On one of those trains?"

She shook her head. "My grandfather disappered five years ago."

"Here in the Sawtooth mountains?"

"No. Grandfather vanished while on a geology expedition in Death Valley, in California."

Solo nodded, remembering. "Yes. He was exploring some subterranean caverns in Death Valley, but that's fifteen hundred miles from here."

"Yes. And five years ago. Still, he did vanish without a trace. Just as the cattle and the trains disappeared. Is it so wild that I'd look for my grandfather here—try to learn all I can about these disappearances? You're here. Yet those trains disappeared in Indiana, didn't they, Mr. Solo?"

Solo smiled, released her arm. "Checkmate."

SIX

SOLO SET up the polygraph machine in Maynard's ranchhouse den. He was checking it out when the door was thrown open and Maynard burst into the room.

The rancher's sun-tanned face was gray. His eyes were distended. He said, "Solo. The bunkhouse. You better come. Quick."

Maynard turned on his heel and Solo followed. The few dude ranchers remaining on the place eyed them silently, coldly as they passed. These people stood up, tense, watchful.

They found the same chilled reception at the bunkhouse. The ranch hands were taut, eyes bleak and troubled.

Maynard thrust open the bunkhouse door and Solo followed him inside it.

Inside the room, Solo slowed, stopped, staring at the men on the bunks.

"Pete and Marty," Maynard said. "They got violently ill last night. Mabel Finnish drove into Cripple Bend to fetch Doc Cullin, but I don't think she'll make it."

Maynard was right. Marty died before Doc Cullin arrived, and there was nothing the medic could do to save Pete.

Maynard caught the doctor's arm. "Why? What caused them to die like that, Doc?"

Cullin shook his head. "I don't know, Carlos. There are no physical signs of any kind. We'll just have to wait for the autopsy."

That evening Solo was working on his daily report when there was a knock at his door in the upstairs of the ranchhouse. He said, "Come in."

The door opened and Doctor Cullin entered. "Maynard said I

should give you the results of the autopsy report, Mr. Solo. Autopsy shows the presence of a nerve gas in the lungs of both men. Death was caused by strangulation; that nerve gas had been in them for some days, slowly choking them."

Solo gazed at the doctor, then stared beyond him at Mabel Finnish, standing gray-faced in his doorway.

ACT II
INCIDENT OF THE MISSING CASTLE

THE TRAIN hurtled downward into the belly of the earth. The stifling darkness shrouded the car where Illya braced himself against the plunging descent.

Breathing was difficult, movement almost impossible. It seemed to Illya as the train lowered that his body became heavier with increased tug of gravity.

Suddenly there was the creaking of giant chains and winches. The train trembled as the huge lift settled into a brilliantly illumined cavern and came to rest.

Illya ran to the windows. Beyond the train, fluorescent lighting made the high-domed caverns brighter than sunlight. Yet Illya knew they were miles beneath the surface of the earth.

He checked the small sender attached to his lapel. Its transistors were in perfect order, its continual flow of bleeps flared unchecked—into the solid rock surrounding him. The small instrument was useless.

From outside the sealed car Illya heard the sounds of men running, shouts.

He wheeled around from the windows. From his jacket he took the components of his machine pistol, working swiftly. He tried to force his fingers to react more swiftly, but there was a languid heaviness to all his movements.

He set the barrel of the pistol into its stock, screwing it into place. But even as he worked he knew he would not work swiftly enough.

There was a whispered sound, as if some magnetic seal had been released. Doors at each end of the custom-built car swung open, suddenly freed.

The gush of machine-driven air filled the car. Illya straightened, feeling unexplained panic.

He took a backward step as the first warmth rushed over him. It enveloped him like some invisible cloak, striking him down to his knees as if it were a physical blow.

Stunned, Illya twisted half around under the unseen impact. He caught at a seat, but fell to his knees. The machine pistol was driven from his grasp, hurled to the floor some feet from him.

Striking on his knees, Illya stared at the gun, concentrating upon it, scrambling toward it.

"He's here! Take him!"

Illya's head jerked up. Men rushed into the car through the

opened doors. The gusts of heated gas seemed to have ebbed.

Staring at the men rushing toward him, Illya grasped out for the machine pistol. In horror he saw his hand strike the gun and lie helpless upon it.

Lift it. Pick it up. Lift it. His mind sent frantic messages to his hands, but his fingers remained stiff, straight.

He could not close them.

Helplessly, sprawled like a bug on the car flooring, Illya stared upward incredulously at the men surrounding him.

His eyes widened. These men looked as if they were like him—or once had been. But all had undergone some strange metamorphosis down here. They were alike in body, with the roundness of moles or fat underground rats. They moved with their heads bent forward, peering through thick-lensed glasses as if life below surface was steadily destroying their sense of sight. Most appalling of all was the doughy pallor of their faces, their bodies—beings who lived shut away from the memory of sunlight.

Illya struggled frantically on the flooring. He managed to lift his weighted, slowly-responding body to his knees. But he could rise no further.

Illya hung there, supported on leaden arms, head drooping between his shoulders. He panted through parted lips, aware suddenly that he was breathing something that was not oxygen—this warm gas was slowly paralyzing his muscles and his body.

He tried to speak, tried to cry out.

It was like a nightmare. He was unable to make a sound.

He reached out one more time for the machine pistol and almost sprawled on his face.

Deep, guttural laughter spewed down over him.

One of the mole men reached down, took up the machine pistol, examining it with interest.

It took an eternity, but Illya managed to lift his head. The men stood, peering squinted-eyed through their thick glasses at him, their faces pulled into savage caricatures of something they remembered as laughter.

The laughter raked at him and Illya tried to cry out. He could not force a sound past his lips. His throat felt swollen, closed. He tried to brace himself, but had no muscular coordination. The warm thick pressure of that strange sick-sweet gas closed upon him like an occluding fog.

He toppled helplessly upon the floor, suffocating and paralyzed, the sound of the weird, wicked laughter raging in his ears.

And then the warmth darkened around him, shutting out everything except that laughter, and this spun like enraged hornets inside his mind.

TWO

THE UNBROKEN, whispered clatter of his wrist-watch alarm awakened Solo an hour before dawn.

For a moment he lay unmoving, protected from the chilled Wyoming darkness, from all the unknown that lay ahead of him.

From the corral below he heard movement and subdued voices of men calling to each other. Wind riffled the curtains at the windows.

Solo yawned, throwing back the covers.

A sharp rap sounded at his door. Maynard's whispered voice came through the facing. "Your horse and pack is ready, Mr. Solo."

"Thanks," Solo said. "I'll be right down."

He swung out of bed, snapped on the small bed-lamp. He slipped his legs into corduroy trousers, and then stood up, donning a heavy shirt.

The whispering, dry-hinge creak of his balcony door, brought him wheeling around.

The door pushed slowly open. Solo caught up his gun, but dropped it when he recognized Mabel Finnish. She moved in from his balcony.

He stared at her. She was dressed for the trail in slacks, heavy jacket and riding boots.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"What makes you think I'm going anywhere?"

"Let's not waste time, Mr. Solo. You're riding alone up into the Sawtooth ranges looking for some trace of those missing cattle, and I'm going with you."

"Nobody but Maynard knew my plan. How did you find it out?"

She gave him a faint smile. "I may as well tell you the whole truth—"

"That will be refreshing."

"I have a small listening device. I hear what I must. It's like a hearing aid, only concealed, and much more powerful. I'm sorry to force myself upon you like this, Mr. Solo, but I have no choice."

"I could think of several—"

"I must find my grandfather. That's all that matters to me. I have to know what you say, what you learn about the disappearance of those cattle, just as I must go with you."

"I'm sorry. That's impossible."

Mabel seemed not even to hear him. "I can be of help to you."

"I don't need your help."

"I've been on those trails."

"I have maps of the ranges. I know where the cattle were last seen. No, I'm sorry, Mabel. It's too dangerous. I don't have to tell you that Pete and Marty died because they were up there. They were attacked by some kind of nerve gas and it was fatal. I can't expose you to such danger."

Her head lifted. "I'm not afraid."

Solo's jaw was taut. "Well, I've

sense enough to be afraid for you."

"You don't understand, Mr. Solo. You're wasting time. I'm going with you."

"Then you're bigger and stronger than you look."

"I'm big enough and strong enough, Mr. Solo."

He grinned. "And lovely enough. I'm truly sorry I can't take you with me."

"I told you." Her voice became deadly. "You'll take me, or you won't go."

He laughed, turning slowly. "How do you plan to stop me?"

For the first time Solo saw the gun in Mabel's hand. He saw something else, too. Her grip was steady. Her finger was firm on the trigger. She knew how to use that small firearm, and she would not hesitate to do it.

Her voice mocked him. "Now do you understand why I'll go with you? I won't hesitate to shoot you."

"What will that buy you?"

"That's it, Mr. Solo. It won't buy either of us anything. That's why I hope you'll be smart enough to agree to take me. I know the mission you're on is urgent to you. But my search is even more urgent to me. I'm sorry, Mr. Solo, but I'm desperate—"

"Enough to shoot me?"

He watched her, but the gun in her hand did not waver.

She nodded. "I'm desperate enough to do anything that will help me to learn the truth about my grandfather. I *know* his disappearance is somehow related to all this. I've got to find out."

"If I find your grandfather, I'll bring him back. I promise that."

The muzzle of her gun tilted slightly. "That's not good enough, Mr. Solo. I go with you or nobody goes. That's up to you now."

Solo chewed at his lip a moment studying her, and that unwavering gun in her fist. He shrugged his shoulders, giving her a reluctant grin of capitulation. "I've been wondering all along how to beg you to ride out with me, Miss Finnish."

Mabel sighed out heavily. "You're very wise, Mr. Solo."

He lifted his hands deprecatingly. "It's really very easy to be wise, Miss Finnish, with a gun staring you in the face."

THREE

THEY CLIMBED steadily into the blue-hazed heights of the Sawtooths, the silences deepening through the morning, noon.

There were no longer even any trails on these lava-scarred mesas. The unchartered wilds had been tortured into ridges and ravines by countless suns and mountain winds.

They reached a treeless escarpment by midafternoon. Solo halted the horses.

Shifting in his saddle, he gazed downward along the way they'd come. It was as if they were the

only human beings in this breathless world of sand-scarred boulders.

Their horses slipped, fighting for footing on the slate outcroppings.

Far below them sprawled waterless plains, vast and uninhabited; above them reared inaccessible plateaus, crags jutting against the sky, massive ranges lost inside monstrous mountains, trackless and forgotten.

Solo shivered slightly. He glanced at Mabel. "I never really knew what the word desolate truly meant until today."

"The silence is unbelievable," she said. "Not even a bird, or an animal."

He sighed. "What are you really doing up here, Mabel?"

She frowned. "I told you. I'm looking for my grandfather."

"I know. It just doesn't add up."

"Nevertheless, it's true."

"Is it? I keep asking myself, why should a young, beautiful girl like you spend her life looking for a man who has been missing for five years?"

"That man is my grandfather, Mr. Solo."

"But he must be dead. They would have found some trace of him."

"Have they found any trace of your trains, Mr. Solo?"

He frowned. "But you. So young. Looks like you'd marry, have a family—"

"It's more important to me to find my grandfather. I know he's alive. He was a very great man, Mr. Solo. I never met another man worth taking me from the search for him."

Solo smiled despite himself. "You're a strange girl."

"It's a strange world, Mr. Solo." She prodded her horse and moved away.

Solo rode slowly. He could not explain why, but felt himself growing taut.

He stiffened in the saddle, searched the boulders and the cliffs around him, moving his gaze slowly, peering. He found nothing, yet the feeling increased that they had ridden into trouble.

There was a sudden, subtle shift in the atmosphere. It was nothing he could explain, yet it was there. The sun was unchanged, undiminished, cresting far to the west of them. The brilliant haze lay across rocks and outcroppings, but there was a difference between this plateau and the land below them.

Troubled, Solo was aware of a faint, but persistent ache in his temples. A headache! Hadn't this been the sign Pete and Marty both noticed first up here?

Something else nagged at Solo. Then he remembered. Mabel had said it. There were no birds, no animals, not even a lizard or a mouse.

He was aware that Mabel had shifted in her saddle and stared back at him, a faint smile twisting

her lovely mouth. "What's wrong, Solo?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I only know that something is wrong."

"It's your imagination."

"Perhaps." Solo reached up, massaging at his temples. "Why don't we stop for coffee?"

Mabel laughed, but agreed. They swung down, ground-tied their horses.

Mabel sat on a small boulder. She watched Solo gather greasewood sticks and start a small fire between two smooth stones. He placed the smoked coffee pot on it; soon the aroma of coffee obscured everything else.

Solo hunkered beside the fire. His eyes ached now, but he remained alert, watchful. He was troubled, though there were no sounds except the crackle of the fire, the bubble of the boiling coffee water, the snuffling of the tethered horses.

"You're scared, Solo." Mabel's voice raked at him.

He glanced up. "Sometimes you have to be smart enough to be scared. Did you know that's how man learned to exist in this world—by being scared first?"

"What scares you up here?" she inquired.

He shook his head. "Everything. Nothing. I've the unshakable feeling that we're being watched."

"Watched?" She laughed. "By whom? By what?"

"I don't know." Solo stared into the fire. "Mabel, something is wrong—and has been for the past hour or so."

Mabel laughed, watching him pour steaming black coffee into tin cups. "It's just your nerves."

He shrugged. "Maybe."

She laughed louder. "Do your corns ache when it rains, Solo?"

He stared at her, frowning. From his vest pocket he removed a small aspirin-sized tin box. He opened it, took out two small purple capsules.

"What's that, Solo?"

He offered her one of the capsules. "It's an antidote for nerve gas."

"Nerve gas?"

"We may walk into it at any minute, Mabel. Maybe we have already."

She shook her head.

He shrugged, said nothing. She refused to take the capsule. He closed his fist, holding it.

She watched him take a purple capsule, wash it down with the coffee.

"It isn't that I'm not grateful," she said, "but I don't believe we're going to find anything like that up here."

"I hope you're right." Suddenly Solo stiffened.

Mabel stared at him. "What's the matter now?"

Solo came upward slightly, staring past her. "Didn't you hear that?"

She jerked her head around. "I didn't hear anything."

"There it is again," Solo said.

While Mabel was turned, staring across her shoulder, he reached out, opened his fist and dropped the purple capsule into her tin coffee cup.

She turned back, frowning. "You're cracking up, Solo. I didn't hear anything."

Solo sighed and shrugged. He sat back, relaxed, watching her drink down her coffee.

FOUR

"How much further are we climbing before we make camp?" Mabel asked an hour later as they rode falteringly upward.

Solo checked the sun.

"Not much longer," he said. "No sense taking a chance riding. A horse can break a leg."

"You worry like a mother hen," Mabel taunted. She prodded her horse, riding suddenly swiftly ahead.

She screamed, throwing her arms up before her face. She twisted, falling from the saddle.

Solo urged his mount forward, but it was as if he rode into an invisible wall. Something struck him and he was driven from his saddle.

Solo went sprawling outward, face first. It was not as though he fell, rather as if he were being thrust downward with terrible force by unseen hands.

The two horses reared, squealing. They tried to run forward, but their way was blocked by this invisible wall. But when they wheeled about, in panic, they were unable to run downhill, either.

Solo struck the ground hard. He felt the savage bite of lava spikes. He rolled along the shale shelf, trying to set himself. He was helpless.

He turned, seeing Mabel huddled on rock outcroppings.

"Mabel!"

He yelled her name again, but she did not answer. She didn't move.

He lifted himself slowly to his

hands and knees, feeling as if he were fighting incredible downward thrust. He fought against this pressure, lunging upward.

He cried out in agony.

It was as if his head struck solid stone. He shuddered, staggering to his knees, rolled helplessly over upon his back.

For one more moment the mountain side skidded around him, the boulders and the clouds changing places, like skittering bats.

He fought against the darkness that blacked out everything. He pushed upward, but could not rise. But this time when he fell, he went plunging downward into darkness where he was conscious of nothing, not even the pain.

Solo had no idea how long he was unconscious.

He forced his eyes open, conscious of the lancing pain, the throbbing in his temples. It was deep dusk, almost full dark, or else an impairment of vision laid an occluding fog on everything.

He tilted his head, saw that Mabel had not stirred. The horses had fallen, and they lay still on the rocks.

He moved his eyes, searching. Nothing appeared to have altered. The incredible emptiness reached outward in every direction. Ghost Riders, he thought. He tried to drive the mindless idea from his brain. He could not do it. He was convinced that he was surrounded by menacing beings, yet he could not see them. They threw him on the ground, and they held him helplessly when he attempted to rise.

He struggled again to get to his knees, but though there were no ties on him, no ropes, or chains, it was as if he were bound.

The nerve gas.

Stunned, Solo lay helplessly on his back, staring at the darkening sky. He and Mabel had ridden into an invisible wall—odorless, colorless nerve gas, clouds and banks of it. Both Pete and Marty must have ridden up the mountains to this place. This gas was what the two cowpokes had inhaled—the fatal fumes.

It had left them confused, dazed. In the case of Marty, victim of hallucinations—he had died believing he spent three days on a prolonged drunk in the bar at Cripple Bend.

Solo struggled against the invisible bonds immobilizing him.

He stared, eyes wide, trying to find some clouding of that gas. There was nothing visible, but it was there.

If those two cowpunchers had ridden into this bank of nerve gas, it had to be piped from some underground storage tanks. And these had to be somewhere nearby —a cave, a well, an abandoned shaft. Something! The answer was that simple, if only he could find it.

Sweating, Solo fought to push himself upward. If he uncovered the cave or shaft from which the

gas emanated, he'd have taken a giant step toward answering the riddle of those missing cattle, perhaps a step toward finding those vanished trains and Illya Kuryakin.

He lay, sweating, and his mind raced, though his body was immobile.

Hallucination.

This was the answer. He saw clearly now how this nerve gas had made it possible to move one thousand head of cattle as if they vanished without leaving a trace. No traces would be seen by men who were brainwashed.

Those two cowpunchers had believed anything suggested to them, while they lay unconscious from the first effects of the gas. *Suggestion!* While they were unconscious, Marty had believed that he'd grown disgusted with tracking and spent three days drinking in Cripple Bend. Pete believe he had fallen from his horse and had lain unconscious.

This meant there was not only strong currents of nerve gas from storage tanks up here, there were men, hidden like vultures—not ghosts, or ghost riders, but men executing some plan of unspeakable evil.

Had those men been here while he lay unconscious? What suggestions had been planted in his mind —and in Mabel's?

Would he be able to think clearly because he had taken a nerve gas antidote? Or would he see what some unseen men had suggested he would see once he could move and walk again?

He pushed up to his knees, and then stopped, shaking his head incredulously.

At first, Solo was afraid to believe his eyes, fearful suddenly that he was experiencing visions as after effects of the nerve gas.

A ninety-foot slate wall in the face of the mountain near them moved slowly like a sliding panel.

Shaking his head, Solo remained on his knees, staring. The opening in the mountain was hangar-sized, and the lighted cavern beyond it was huge, shadowed—a place to swallow a thousand cattle easily.

His heart battered at his rib cage. Whether he lived to tell it or not, he'd solved the riddle of how those cattle had vanished and why the searchers found no traces left behind them.

A dozen men rushed through the opening in the side of the mountain.

They took a few steps, then slowed, paused, stopped for an instant.

Watching them, Solo wondered if they'd banged into the invisible wall of gas.

They inched forward, and he saw they were almost bat blind in the natural light of the outside world!

They chattered at each other. Solo could not understand what

they said, only that they seemed to be encouraging their fellows to move forward in this strange environment.

Unsure whether they were real or hallucination, Solo watched them move toward him.

All wore identical dun colored coveralls, tightly zipped to their throats. Their heads and faces were encased in plastic masks, transparent and worn over heavy-rimmed glasses and inhalers covering their noses and mouths. Narrow slits across their lenses kept out as much painful surface glare as possible.

Still they were almost blinded in the lowering darkness of the mountainside.

They faltered painfully forward, almost like men on tightropes, feeling their way.

They surrounded Solo and Mabel on the rock shelf.

One of the men said, "Drag those horses inside the cavern—we're to leave no traces of these people."

A group of the men turned their attention to the horses, and the animals were carted on small-wheeled flat cars through the doors.

Solo was lifted, placed on a canvas stretcher. He lay still, keeping his eyes barely opened as he was borne across the lava beds toward the cavern.

He saw that two of the men bore Mabel on a litter beside his.

Eyes almost closed, Solo stared

at Mabel's face. She appeared to be unconscious. She had not moved since she'd fallen from her horse. He watched her, puzzled.

When they had been moved inside the cavern, the slate walls were closed, sliding back into place.

At a double-timed pace, once they were inside the artificially-lighted cavern, the men carried the two litters to an elevator set in an inner wall. This lift was huge large enough to handle trucks, train cars, even transport planes.

Solo scowled, understanding suddenly how a great many unexplained disappearances—of people, planes, material—had been accomplished over the past years.

Winches, cables, ratchets wailed, protesting, as the lift was activated, plummetting breathtakingly downward toward the core of the earth.

Lying on the litter, Solo tried to reckon the depth of the descent, but it was impossible. One mile? Two? Three? He could not say.

The rounded, dun-clad men removed their masks, stood at attention. Solo realized they stared at him and he lay still, seeing that they might kill him if they found that he was conscious.

Just when Solo decided the elevator would never stop its plunging toward the center of the earth, it slammed to a soul-shaking stop.

One of the men shouted, "All right. Quickly. Get them out of here!"

"To the chamber of zombies?" one of the men at the litters asked.

"Of course," the group leader answered. "Where else? The master will send for them if he wants to see them."

The elevator doors parted, sliding back smoothly. Solo was impressed by the smooth operation, and he wondered if there was perhaps some more sophisticated power than electricity generated above ground?

The litter men took up the two stretchers, running in that odd, double-time gait.

In stunned amazement, Solo saw they'd emerged into a huge underground metropolis, miles below the earth's surface!

The sprawling city's main arteries, Solo saw, were not paved streets, but instead were gleaming rails of tracks, laced out in every direction. Trains thundered along them, coming and going through a labyrinth of hundred-foot tunnels, larger than anything Solo had encountered in the world-famed caverns he'd visited.

There were no buildings as such along these caverns, and milk-white fluorescent tubings stretched throughout the length of every tunnel.

Caves had been gouged as houses in the tunnel walls, and each of these were constantly illumined by these lighting tubes in unbroken links.

A door in a stone wall slid open. The litter bearers carried the two

stretchers inside the chamber the size of Grand Central Station, and like it, built on many levels.

The huge central room where Mabel and Solo were placed on their litters was crowded with humanity.

The men set the litters down, went out of the door, which closed silently.

Solo sat up, looked around in this chamber continuously illumined by the tubing of lights.

Hundreds of people crouched on the stone flooring. There were more of them on the several levels that opened out above this main floor. These people neither moved nor spoke.

Gradually Solo became aware of a steady buzzing sound. It seemed to have begun when he entered the chamber of zombies, and it neither grew louder nor diminished.

He could not find the cause of the sound, or its source.

He saw that these people were, like Mabel and him, recent underworld arrivals. Were these human beings part of those thousands who had vanished from homes, jobs, friends—without a trace?

The incessant buzzing continued.

Solo glanced at Mabel. She appeared to be sleeping deeply. She remained unmoving.

The buzzing increased, tormenting him. He stood up and looked around. No one else seemed aware of this steady clatter. He moved slowly, trying to locate the source of the sound.

No matter where he walked in the huge chamber, the sound remained constant, unchanging.

He stopped, suddenly realizing what the sound was, where it came from.

He shoved his hand into his jacket pocket, brought out a small pen-sized receiver. The bleeps were louder now, they came from his signal receiver—a wave-length set up to pick out the bleeps sent from a lapel-set worn by Illya Kuryakin!

Solo broke into a smile. Illya was somewhere inside this chamber of zombies! He'd found Illya!

He turned all the way around, searching for Illya among the unmoving humanity.

He turned the receiver slowly until the volume of the bleeps increased, giving him his direction. He ran through the aisles of immobile human beings.

He saw a stout, graying man sprawled on a couch, and he paused, recognizing the billionaire philanthropist, Harrison Howell. He'd seen that face often enough recently on identification screens at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

He gazed at the staring man a second, but did not stop. It was enough for the moment that he'd located Howell.

He found Illya crouched, vacant-eyed, against a wall.

Solo said, "Illya?"

Kuryakin remained unmoving, staring straight ahead.

Solo knelt before Illya.

From a small leather kit, Solo removed a syringe, yellow with nerve-gas antidote, and needle. He unbuttoned Illya's shirt, pushed it off his shoulder.

He plunged the needle into the soft flesh of Illya's upper arm.

Illya cried out, protesting. "That hurt!"

Illya stirred, pushing away from Solo and shrugging his shirt back into place.

Solo grinned, watching color return to Illya's cheeks.

"Illya," he said, "It's me. Solo. Can you hear me?"

Illya made an impatient gesture. "Why shouldn't I hear you? I see you. You right in front of me. What's the matter with you anyhow, Napoleon?"

Suddenly Illya stopped talking as memory returned. He peered around them, his gaze touching at the slouched people in the huge, silent chamber.

Stunned, Illya shook his head. He looked ill. "How did we get in this place, Napoleon?"

Solo winced. He said, "Think, Illya. Try to clear your mind. Can't you remember?"

Illya scowled with the effort. But his eyes brightened and he nodded. "Yes. I remember now. The train. It went off the main line, Napoleon, to a spur-siding that led to an underground elevator. Unbelievable! Large enough to accommodate that huge streamliner. We plunged downward—I don't know how far. Then we stopped in this big, brilliantly lighted place. I think that's when the gas hit me. I remember trying to fight my way out, but I was helpless, paralyzed."

"Nerve gas," Solo said. "It's what they use on all their victims." He glanced about. "This place is probably under surveillance. For the time being, we better act like the rest of these people."

Illya shook his head.

"I've had enough being a zombie," he said. "I've got a better idea. Let's get out of here."

Solo laughed suddenly, feeling better. He clapped Illya on the shoulder, nodding.

"I'll buy that, partner," he said.

Illya glanced around one more time, shuddering involuntarily.

"I've seen enough," he said. "Let's travel."

Solo nodded, leading the way between the rows of people crouched in staring silence.

"Here's a pretty big prize," he said across his shoulder to Illya. He paused beside the immobile philanthropist.

"Harrison Howell!" Illya said. "We better take him along."

Solo nodded, then bent closer, checked Howell's eyes, his pulse. "Better not try it. Not now. It's no good; he's under too deep, and I'm out of antidote."

Illya gazed into the unseeing

eyes of the billionaire. "Sorry, fellow." He jerked his gaze up. "How do we get out of here? This is as depressing as a visit to my reltives."

Solo grinned. "Right. I've seen more animation at chess tourneys." He gestured across the wide cavern. "They brought me in through that door over there. Let's see if we can open it."

He ran ahead of Illya to the litter on which he'd been borne into this chamber. He drew up, frowning. Both litters were empty. Mabel Finnish was gone.

"What's wrong, Napoleon?" Illya said. "Lost something?"

Solo exhaled. "I hope so."

They drew up, staring helplessly at the single door in the chamber wall—it appeared to be solid rock in solid rock.

"Must be a button or lever somewhere," Solo said.

Illya was already running his hands along the door edges, the framing. He shook his head. "Nothing on our side, I'm afraid."

"But they did open this door from inside when they left me in here. Maybe a foot lever."

Illya stared about the stone floor, the rock wall. He shook his head. "I see nothing." He struck the door with the side of his fist in frustration.

Almost magically the door glided open. Illya's mouth parted in astonishment, but then closed again when he saw the three stout, dun-clad men and the guns in their arms.

Illya sighed, glancing at Solo. "I wanted out, but this wasn't exactly the escape plan I had in mind."

FIVE

THE ARMED men prodded Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo ahead of them along the narrow walk-ways that paralleled all the gleaming tracks through the labyrinth of tunnels.

Trains raced past, crowded with men and material. There was a furious sense of activity everywhere in the brilliantly illumined caverns.

One of the guards jabbed a gun into Illya's back. Illya and Solo paused. The guard did not speak but jerked his head along a smaller, white-tiled corridor.

The atmosphere cooled in this seemingly endless corridor. It was quieter; there was none of the fevered activity of the tunnels.

Finally they reached a bright green door before which stood two green-clad guards.

The green door slid into the stone wall; the guards stepped back, standing at attention. The dun-clad soldiers ordered Solo and Illya through the door, but did not follow.

The green door closed behind them and they were alone in a green-hued grotto. They saw that this place, like all other chambers,

tunnels, caverns and corridors, was lighted by the endless fluorescent tubing, but the softer hue came from the green walls.

Across the far wall was three-foot thick, green tinted glass. Without speaking, Solo and Illya walked toward it. Strong light filtered through the glass from beyond.

They paused, seeing that beyond the glass wall, a rushing river swirled, alive with odd mud-colored fish and marine life.

"Blind," Illya whispered. "They don't even have eyes. We must be miles below ground—"

"Interested in marine life, gentlemen?"

A subdued voice spoke from behind them. They wheeled around in time to see a ten-foot door in a third wall closing. For an instant they glimpsed suites of incomparable luxury, all done in restful hues of pale blue, violet, tan.

Then the doors closed and they concentrated upon their host, a most remarkable looking man.

He was unforgettable.

One saw first that he'd been many years underground, and that the life had altered him, almost faster than he could force himself to adapt.

Clearly, he was almost blind. His eyes appeared monstrous, magnified behind thick lenses in black-rimmed frames. He'd been a big man, but he seemed to have slumped inward and his body had become pear-shaped. His legs were

round like watermelons and he moved languidly.

Any movement appeared to exert him beyond endurance, and he breathed loudly with every step, gasping for breath. He wore green coveralls, zippered tightly, and sheep-lined slippers upon feet far too small for his round form.

When he spoke it was with this same gasping effort, a few words, then a fight for breath. But he held himself as erect as possible. Clearly he was a man of consequence, and knew it.

"You must be our leader," Illya said.

The huge man rolled forward slowly, agonizingly, peering at them through near-sighted eyes which gave him the look of a mole.

"I am the master here," he said, voice rasping.

"We're flattered, I'm sure," Solo said. "But to what do we owe your august attention?"

The rotund man paused a few feet from them. He drew a deep

breath, spoke slowly, gaspingly: "You were watched on television, gentlemen, in the chamber—and unless you get ideas which must prove fatal to you, you are being watched at this moment by my men."

"It never occurred to us we weren't," Solo said, bowing slightly.

"You should have thought of this when you were in the chambers, Mr. Solo. We take the people from that chamber, Mr. Solo, and we make good citizens of them, in our own good time. We—would have done as much for you—and Mr. Kuryakin—if we had not monitored your attempt to escape."

"And now you're angry at us," Illya said in irony.

The stout man nodded, gasping as he spoke: "We have learned who you are. I am afraid this means you must die. . . . Too bad, too. When I first glimpsed you, I had hopes of including such fine young men as you are—in my plans for the brilliant new existence I envision for the world."

ACT III
INCIDENT OF THE PREHISTORIC RIVERS

"OH?" ILLYA said. "Sort of your own version of the Great Society?"

"A greater society," said the gasping voice, a note of pride vibrating it.

"I can't be very impressed by what I've seen," Solo said, needling the rotund man.

The round head nodded. "Perhaps this is because you have not seen enough. Isn't a little knowledge always a dangerous thing, Mr. Solo?"

"Maybe," Solo said. "But I don't think you're doing people any favors by turning them into half-blind moles, like the ones I've seen, or the zombies in that chamber over there."

The man waved a stout arm languidly. "Temporary, Mr. Solo. I assure you, it's all only temporary."

"I'm sure of that."

"I detect your sarcasm, sir. But if you could have been allowed to stay here awhile, you would have been impressed—despite yourself."

The rotund man held his breath a moment, then waved his arm toward the lighting tubes. "Look at our lights! We've lighted the core of the earth! Continuous tubing, atom-generated power. Have the bungling scientists on the earth's surface accomplished any such miracle? No. But the scientists I brought here were able to do it, because I set them to that one task until it was completed."

Illya stared at him. "Do you really think men will lead better lives in a world like this?"

"Ah, no. We shall return to the earth's surface when we are ready—soon now."

Solo stared at the green-clad mole-round man. Like every

power-mad being, he was an egomaniac—whether this was cause or result, Solo had never been able to determine. But it had been true since time began, from Alexander, through Attila, Hitler and every mad creature lusting to control his fellow beings and enslave them.

"Ready to take over, are you?" he said.

The stout man smiled. "At last. We have made alliances with surface-forces—we are ready to strike and nothing can stop us."

"THRUSH, no doubt, is your upperworld alliance?" Solo suggested.

The green-clad shoulders lifted slightly. "I don't mind admitting to you that THRUSH has aims sympathetic and parallel to our own.

Illya burst out, "Who are you, that you'd believe international conspiracy like THRUSH could mean well for anyone except themselves?"

The round face pulled into a smile. "Perhaps THRUSH stands to lose—when other powers on the earth's surface lose. THRUSH has been most cooperative. I'm sure they will continue to be, until we no longer have any use for them."

Solo laughed suddenly. "Wonderful. It should be great when the jackals turn on each other."

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Mr. Solo. There will be no jackals—to quote your estimate of THRUSH—remaining above ground. That day will come soon. Don't you understand? I have atomic power down here. For every peaceful use—look at the huge stone doors in solid rock walls that glide open with the ease unheard of before.

"Look at our lighting. All atomic-powered. And I have atomic warheads. They are ready for use. No, Mr. Solo, when we strike at the earth-surface cities, only those beings lucky enough to be down here with us will survive. And when the earth's crust is safe for human inhabitance again, we shall rise up there—with the magnificent kind of society the earth should have!"

Solo whispered it. "So you've been choosing your people carefully—people you mean to save for your new existence? People like Harrison Howell?"

"Him among others. A man like Howell will mean a great deal in the new order. And so will the others we have chosen. I must say we have acted cleverly. Some were reported dead—by heart attack, by drowning, by lost planes, accidents, lost at sea. We wanted them; we brought them down here, one way or another."

"Who are you?" Illya said again, gazing at the gasping man.

"Haven't you guessed?" the man inquired, breathing heavily. "Who else could have found this world, made it a reality?"

"I've guessed," Solo said. "But I can't believe it."

"Ah? You know me, then, Mr. Solo?"

"Leonard Finnish," Solo said, shaking his head. "The UCLA geology professor. But you're not the sort of man the world has been mourning for the past five years."

The doughy, gray face flushed. "Those people! What do they know? They laughed at me five years ago, ten years ago, fifteen years ago. Another foolish professor, too stupid to come in out of the rain! Well, we shall see now if I was right. I tried to tell them about the world inside the belly of the earth. They wouldn't listen! They laughed!"

Solo sighed. "They should have listened."

Leonard Finnish laughed. He sucked in agonizing breaths. "Yes, Mr. Solo, they should have listened. Oh, they listened as long as I talked only the stupid, elementary geology facts they wanted to hear —the inner crusts of the earth. They were so pleased when I proved to them the age of the very areas of the earth by the differences in those layers.

"But I was no longer interested in the Basement Complex and its relatively short span of a half-billion years in the making, or the deposits of the Paleozoic Era. There was no longer any excitement in fumbling around Triassic, Jurassic or Cretaceous formations. I knew as long as fifteen years ago that there was an inner world undreamed of by your less imaginative geologists."

"And so you set out to find it," Illya said. "Only—I remember now. You were lost in a geologist expedition, five years ago, in Death Valley."

The face pulled into a doughy smile. "Ah, yes. Death Valley. The key. This was the key! Far below the surface of Death Valley, I found what I had been seeking—one of those incredible, prehistoric river beds, long dry, forgotten for eons, but linked with other huge chasms. I had to follow it. And that's why I disappeared. That's why I am here now, finally, with secrets of the inner earth that will make me master of the world."

"You proved all your theories, Professor?" Solo prodded.

Exhausted from the exertion of talking, the stout man settled into a reclining leather chair, and lay for some moments, breathing from small oxygen flasks.

"We are many billions of years inside the earth's crust, gentlemen. Difficult even for a body that's anxious to adapt, to learn to live in such an alien atmosphere. . . . But to answer your question, Mr. Solo. Yes, I proved all my theories beyond my most frantic dreams. Rib-like valleys and huge river beds, dwarfing anything known on the surface today; unbelievable subterranean freeways to every part of the western hemisphere.

"Perhaps a wall to be blown

away here, another there; but the links existed, I had only to find them, open them, and then lace them with railings—a few hours from Chicago to New Orleans, from San Francisco across to New York."

"And once you had them—there was only one use for those underground freeways—move fast and secretly, transporting anything you wished, including atomic destruction," Solo said.

Finnish smiled. "You simplify it, but that's the main idea. THRUSH was pleased to aid me in recruiting labor through Mexico, nuclear components through Canada, and the best scientific minds. At first we could take trains only car by car, an engine here, another there. But our atomic-powered elevators have made anything possible!"

Finnish swung out his leaden arm to an oblong table beside his chair. He took up one of the dozens of palm-sized rectangles that Illya and Solo now saw were placed on every table in the room—for instant use by a near-sighted man.

Finnish pressed the button on the instrument.

At once a door slid open in a wall and a stout-bodied servant appeared there. He entered, bowing before Finnish.

Solo grinned: "Things were never like this at UCLA, eh, Professor?"

Finnish jerked his head up. He did not smile. "Some beings are mentally inferior, Mr. Solo, born to be servants." He spoke to the waiting hireling: "Serve drinks."

The man left the room, the door sliding open at a movement of Finnish's hand upon the small instrument in his palm. Moments later, the servant returned with decanter, glasses. He poured, served them to Finnish, Solo and Illya.

Finnish leaned forward in his leather chair, gesturing with his glass. "A toast, gentlemen. To my magnificent new society."

Solo shrugged, but drank. "If you're to have inferiors and masters, it looks like the same old rat race, with just different fat rats running things."

"Things will be run as they should be," Finnish said. "Too bad neither of you will live to see it."

Illya held his glass, but did not drink. "Mind saying how you hope to accomplish this take-over of world power?"

"Not at all. If your intellects fail to grasp the potential of underground freeways opening up this hemisphere to me, I'll be glad to explain. Your deaths have been set; you can no longer hope to interfere: Underground trains will carry our nuclear warheads—all traveling, unheard, undetected, deep inside the earth, at more than a hundred miles per hour.

"They will strike simultaneously from *beneath!* Chicago, New York, Washington. San Francisco. All blown to fragments at the same in-

stant. Can your minds encompass the magnitude of this? The so-called free-world brought to its knees in one mighty operation!"

Illya stood as if considering this for some moments. He sipped at his drink, liked it, smiled vaguely and drank again.

Finnish peered at him near-sightedly. "My plan begins to appeal to you?"

Illya strode about the room, sipping glumly. "Not particularly."

"Then why have you decided to drink with me?"

Illya shrugged. "Oh. I decided I was thirsty. Besides, your plan is shot full of holes. I tell you frankly, Professor, it's not going to work."

Finnish sat forward, gray face flushed. "Is that why you smile? You think I can be stopped now?"

"I think so." Illya continued prowling.

"Stand still and talk to me! I could have you killed at this moment!" Finnish cried.

Illya shrugged again. "This might bolster your ego, Professor, but it won't improve your plan. No. I see that as doomed, and you along with it. Unless you call it off now!"

Raging, the rotund man swung up from his chair, pressing the buttons of his signal-sender. The doors slid open and dun-clad soldiers double-timed into the room, armed. They came to attention, stood waiting.

Finnish hesitated, gasping for breath. Not taking his peering gaze from Illya's face, he said, "Now, if you hope for one extra moment alive—tell me why I shall fail."

Illya nodded. He set down his empty glass, then inserted his finger into it, wiped it around the bowl, licked it with delight. "A pleasure. You see, Professor, it occurs to me that the train I rode that night—even if communications failed, once it was within the rock-bound inner crust of the earth—still it sent bleeps out until that instant.

"Don't you see, Professor? They know exactly, precisely, the spot where my train left the earth's surface. They may be confused for a spell. But soon they'll discover the break. Once they do, it's a matter of time—time running out for you."

"Do you think we would have boldly taken two huge streamliners when nothing on earth could hope to stop us?"

"Sorry, Professor," Illya said, his tone saying he was not at all sorry. "It won't work that way. You could have hoped for success, only as long as no one above ground suspected from where you'd strike. They'll find the way down here now and they'll stop you, whether Solo and I live to see that or not."

"Get them out of here!" Professor Finnish's voice rose, cracking. He pressed the small signal sender again, frantically. "Throw these men in the dungeons until the war-

heads are ready to roll. We'll allow these noble meddlers to deliver at least two of the atomic warheads they're so certain will never be delivered!"

TWO

SOLO PROWLED the dungeon into which the dun-clad guards had thrown him and Illya. This was a breathless cavity holed out of solid rock. He found the small round disc through which oxygen was pumped into the ten by ten foot cave. He pounded his fists against the door, finding this as solid as the walls.

He turned, glancing at Illya. "I'll say one thing. You talked us into a real hole this time."

Illya moved with puma-grace along the walls, tracing his hands along them, listening. He looked over his shoulder, grinned. "Disagree. Maybe what I've done has prolonged our lives. Finnish had us marked for instant death. Now he plans to let us ride prisoners on a couple of those atomic-warhead trains."

"A delightful development," Solo said.

"Maybe not. What's that old Hungarian proverb?"

"There's no place like home?"

"Almost. The one I had in mind goes, 'Where there's life, there's a way out.' "

Solo scowled at the small air opening in the wall. "I hope you find that way out quickly, Illya. They're flooding this place with that gas again. We're on our way to being zombies."

"How do you know?" Illya pressed against the wall, staring at him.

"They're doing it all right. That nerve gas is odorless, colorless, tasteless, but it's being pumped in here right now instead of oxygen. I'm getting that headache and eye-burn. That's the first warning. And this time, old friend, we're fresh out of any antidote for it."

Illya straightened slightly. "Maybe one of these will help."

Solo's eyes widened with relief and wonder when Illya took one of the fountain-pen sized oxygen flasks from his jacket pocket. He extended it. "Just press the nozzle, as our friend the professor did."

Solo grinned incredulously as Illya produced another oxygen flask and fitted the nose cone against his own nostrils.

"Where'd you get these things?" Solo said.

Illya grinned. "Got dozens of them while I was at it. They looked like the handiest little gadgets we could collect in a place like this. They were all over Finnish's room. He had to have them where he could grab one quickly. Didn't you notice?"

"I noticed. But how did you get away with them? It's a wonder you didn't get us killed on the spot."

Illya smiled. "I figured the odds

on our escaping weren't too good anyhow. And there's one good thing about being in a room with a half-blind man—he's not continually watching every move you make."

Solo exhaled. "But he warned you that he had closed circuit television cameras fixed on you."

Illya shrugged. "More half-blind men. That's what I told myself."

"And you took them, knowing they were watching you?"

"I figured I'd let my nearsighted friends learn the hard way that other old Hungarian proverb—the hand is quicker than the eye. They watched me drink, sip, lick my fingers, wave one hand. They should have been watching both my hands."

Solo grinned at him, continued using the pressure-flask. There was not much hope in his smile. He moved along the walls, seeking a weakness, a break. He found none and the flat tone of his voice betrayed his frustration.

"I don't care much about dying, for a cause like Finnish's. Still, to do anything to stop him we've got to do more than stay alive on oxygen flasks. We've got to get out of here." He shook his head ruefully. "Too bad you didn't pick up some of those magic door openers while you were shoplifting."

Illya reached into his other jacket pocket and held up one of the palm-sized rectangles. "You mean this? Opens any door in the city. Have one; have two. They're small."

* * *

ILLYA AND SOLO kept close to the shadowed walls, running.

They slowed as they neared the end of the corridor. Beyond, where the corridor opened into the huge tunnel with walks and tracks and working people, there were fevered sounds of activity.

Solo and Illya moved cautiously near the end of the corridor. The workers were loading beef on train cars, unloading other gear, working in silence, panting for breath, making every motion in languid heaviness.

Along the silver rails of the tracks armed guards plodded in heavy tread, carrying their weapons loosely at their sides.

Solo and Illya remained motionless for some moments, watching the workers and guards. All were in the dun-colored coveralls, the standard uniform for workers and guards in the tunnels.

Solo whispered across his shoulder to Illya. "We can bet our lives there are TV monitors fixed on all these lighted tunnels."

"Big brother watching his happy subjects at work and play," Illya said.

Solo nodded. "They're going to have a greater society, whether it kills them or not. But we've gone as far as we can go like this. We got one break—obviously there was no TV camera in the dungeon, or in

this corridor. But we can't move around out there, unless we're dressed like the natives."

Illya nodded. "Right. Once they gander us on their monitors we're marked pigeons. Even the blind men will recognize us in these clothes."

"Clear enough why they dress everybody alike. It makes them easier to keep in line."

Illya said, "Could work against them, too."

Solo inched closer to the mouth of the corridor. Sighing, he whispered across his shoulder, "Will you be the decoy, or shall I?"

Illya drew a deep breath, set himself. "I make an elegant decoy —classic profile and all that stuff, you know."

He darted from the corridor, ran out into the tunnel almost to the place where the mole-round men were loading the cars.

Workers yelled, and the fat guards reacted. They moved in slow motion, but they did move. By the time the two nearest guards wheeled around and got their guns to their shoulders, Illya had already raced back into the corridor.

"Here they come!" he said to Solo as he passed.

The heavy treads came nearer, like elephants charging.

The first guard bounded into the corridor. He was only inches from the place where Solo was pressed against the tile wall. Solo let him pass, but reached out and deftly jerked off the guard's thick-lensed glasses.

The blinded guard cried out, a sound of guttural terror as he toppled past Solo. Solo smashed the glasses against the wall and turned back, waiting for the second armed guard.

This one lumbered into the corridor, gun raised against his fat chest. He tried to slow when he heard the cry of his fellow guard.

Solo drove his fist wrist deep into the fat stomach. The guard cried out, doubling forward. Solo judo-chopped him across the neck. The gun was flung into the corridor and the guard went sprawling after it. Solo snagged off the glasses, smashing them.

Then he half-lifted the guard and tossed him beside his unconscious partner.

Illya wasted a moment blowing on his fist. Solo was already undressing and Illya followed suit. Solo unzipped the coveralls, worked them off the porcine bodies. They donned the guards' suits, took up their guns.

Solo broke the lenses from the black-rimmed glasses, gave one pair to Illya and set the other on his nose. They took up the rifles and moved along the corridor toward the tunnel.

Illya strode ahead of Solo, until Napoleon's voice lashed out after him. "You look wrong when you walk that fast; you look too restless to be a native."

At the very brink of the corridor, Illya slowed and grinned across his shoulder. "Right."

"Just remember that," Solo warned. "We walk like fat men, no matter what happens. We won't get anywhere down here by hurrying."

THREE

CARRYING the weapons in the sluggish manner of the other guards, Solo and Illya sauntered along the walks past the loading train cars. Workers kept moving without glancing at them. Other guards leaned against the walls. None gave Solo and Illya more than brief, myopic glances.

Illya said, "Everything's going fine, but I feel like I'm carrying a target on my back."

"Just keep moving."

"They must have seen me on those monitoring screens."

"I've an idea we'll find out about that at any moment. They likely have their own ways of handling situations like this."

"You don't fill a guy's day with sunlight, do you?"

Solo was almost breathless. He longed to look over his shoulder, yet did not dare to. "It's just that I won't really relax until I get out of here."

By now they had moved in that lumbering pace to the head of the long train.

Solo slowed, touching Illya's sleeve. He nodded, indicating the cab of the engine. Two dun-clad men slouched at their places in the cab, the engineer and his assistant. The powerful engines, breathing, smoked, waiting a signal to roll.

Solo jerked his head upward. Illya nodded and moved ahead of him, swinging up into the cab.

The engineer and assistant turned in that leaden way. The engineer spoke coldly: "What do you want?"

"This train," Illya said. "Do you mind?"

The engineer squinted, peering more closely. He saw the slack dun-colored uniform, the lense-less glasses. The rotund man shuddered visibly, crying out: "You're not one of us!"

Illya nodded, smiling. "Nicest thing anybody's ever said to me."

Solo stepped close beside Illya, raising the gun, fixing his finger on its trigger. "I got the word for you. Never mind who we are. Get this train moving!"

"We're waiting for our orders!"

"You just got 'em," Illya said. He thrust the barrel of his gun into the engineer's fat belly. "Move it!"

The engineer nodded, turning slowly.

He engaged the gears. The train shivered, then inched forward. His voice rasped with contempt. "Where do you think you are going?"

Illya prodded him harder with the gun barrel. His voice was soft,

"Miami's nice this time of the year."

Solo watched the stout guards falter to attention, jerking up their guns as the train ground into motion. He spoke warningly over his shoulder. "The important thing for you, friend, is to get this train moving."

"I don't think there's any real misunderstanding. Is there?" Illya lifted the gun and let it bite into the engineer's flabby neck.

"No. None." All protest seeped from the engineer's voice. He and his assistant turned their attention to heading the train out.

Guards fired from the walks. They waddled forward, running as the train gathered speed. Bullets ricocheted off the metal of the cab. The two engine men crouched low, but kept working. The train moved faster.

As if reacting to delayed messages, workers in the train cars straightened, belatedly realizing the train was moving. They ran, leaping from the cars, striking the walls, or rolling along the walks like helpless bugs. Firing, the near-sighted guards stumbled over the fallen workers or collided with those still jumping from the faster rolling cars.

Solo fired his gun, aiming high, hoping only to keep the guards back until the train picked up momentum.

The engines struggled; the spinning wheels clicked on the railings.

Corridors, cavern houses, white tubes of lights raced past.

Solo leaned out of the cab window, watching the loading yard and the guards receding in the distance. He stayed a moment as the train swayed on its braces.

Finally he turned, walked close to the engineer at the throttle.

Solo said, "I heard your trains can do a hundred miles an hour—"

"More!" The engineer straightened, showing his pride in this underworld rolling stock. "Much more!"

Solo grinned coldly at him. "All

I want out of you then—is the very best this train can do."

Solo and Illya braced themselves in the swaying cab as the train moved with incredible speed, like a bullet through the white-glowing tunnels. The whole length of the monstrous train shivered. There were sudden turns in the runs, but the engineer did not slow.

Solo moved to the bulkhead of the cab, bracing himself. But Illya did not move. Strange fires burned intensely in the blue depths of his eyes. His wheat-colored hair fluttered on his forehead.

His mouth pulled across his lips. He shouted at the engineer: "Faster! Man, you can go faster than this!"

Solo stared at Illya, realizing that he didn't even really know this wild man who had been closer to him than any other.

"Move it, man!" Illya shouted at the engineer. "I told you, we're anxious to flake out of here."

The stout head turned on the fat shoulders. The engineer's mud-gray face flushed. "Sure, I can give it more speed—"

"Then do it!"

"Do you think it matters? It doesn't matter how fast you run, how fast you force this train; you cannot escape the master."

Illya raged with laughter. "That old boy really has got you brainwashed, hasn't he?"

Stiffening, the engineer thrust the throttle forward. The train shuddered, seeming to lie on its side as it slid around a hairpin bend. "You'll see!" He concentrated on his instruments. "I'll tell you this—and we have learned it is true down here—no one escapes the master."

Illya laughed. "Your master says we can't escape." He pressed the snout of the gun into the thick jowls. "This gun says we'd better. Now who are you going to believe, eh?"

Solo stared through the cab window as the fantastic underworld fled past the screaming train. Incredible formations whipped by, like nightmare fragments.

He spoke, awed: "Finnish didn't lie about one thing. There are whole valleys down here, three mile river beds. It's like a domed world."

"It's the master's world," the engineer said. "And the master controls it. As you will find."

The train whipped into a tunnel that seemed to press along the sleek exterior, and through it into a canyon of incredible depth and width. Underground towns loomed ahead, red lights flashing.

The engineer shouted, "Those warning signals! We've got to obey them."

"Negative," Illya said. "You keep moving."

People raced, like frantic animals on the walks, pressing close to the tracks. Guards knelt, guns at their shoulders, fixed on the train.

They fired as the streamliner wailed past.

The engineer spoke coldly across his shoulder. "It should not be long now. The word is flashing ahead to stop you."

Illya grinned at him wolfishly. "Just see that they don't."

"You don't understand," the engineer began.

"I know," Illya said. "It's like a broken record by now—"

"—no one can defy the master."

FOUR

WITH HIS THREE ministers waddling at his heels, Leonard Finnish plodded toward the control room. He held his signal-disc out before him, pressed it, and doors slid open before them.

The control room was frantic with activity, static with the tensions that seemed to rise from the television monitoring screens and from the automated control devices banked in the walls.

Silent men hunched on stools before the banks of flickering monitoring screens. Though they did not speak, their myopic eyes showed their sense of panic. Only the screen showing the stolen streamliner racing away from the center had any meaning at the moment.

Followed by his ministers, Finnish padded through the banks of control panels. He looked neither left nor right but went directly to the screen showing the stolen train.

"Racing at top speed, master," one of the monitors said to Finnish.

Finnish gave the man the briefest nod. He stared for some moments at the screen, the train whipping through tunnels, across wide valleys.

Watching the picture, Finnish pressed fat fingers against his throat, wheezing. A man thrust a small oxygen flask to him. Finnish took it, pressed its cone over his nostrils, never taking his gaze from that flashing picture.

He stared for a long time. It was as if he could see within the train cab itself where those arrogant young adventurers were in control, actually believing they could defy him, escape him—and live.

Finnish's pouting lips twisted. He sucked air deeply from the flask.

"What orders have you given?" he gasped.

"We've sent orders to all towns on that line to halt the train. But three cities now have failed to stop them, even to slow them."

Finnish sucked a deep breath from the oxygen cone. His voice was cold. "I'll take over now."

The monitor bowed, moving away from the screen and the microphones.

"Yes, Master."

Finnish draped himself painfully upon the monitoring stool. He peered some moments at the flashing screen, his face the gray of

ashes. "I've not come this far to be stopped now. By anyone. No, not anyone!"

Lights flashed on the instrument panel before the engineer.

The stout assistant reached out toward the panel switches, but Illya leaped forward, snagged his wrist.

"What are you doing?"

"It is the signal from the control room," the engineer said. "We are being told to switch on our intercom receivers for a top priority message."

Illya released the assistant's wrist. "Ah? The master himself, eh?"

"That's right," the engineer said flatly.

The assistant flipped a switch on the instrument panel. The receivers crackled.

Leonard Finnish's wheezing voice suddenly filled the engine cab: "Mr. Solo? Mr. Kuryakin? Do you hear me?"

Illya glanced at the engineer. The fat man nodded. "Speak. The master will hear you."

"We're here," Illya said.

The speaker crackled a moment. "This is Leonard Finnish speaking, Solo. And you, Kuryakin. Listen carefully. I shall warn you but once. Stop my train instantly. Return it to the yards."

The engineer's voice rattled with a pleased laugh.

Solo moved near the cab speaker. "Sorry, Professor. You must know we're not going to do that. We're on our way out of here."

Illya laughed. "That's right, Professor. I say that our agents probably have located your Indiana elevator shaft, your secret spur-line. But if they haven't, they'll hear from us."

Finnish's voice wheezed through the crackling speaker. "You remain arrogant, eh? You're wasting time."

"Time's running out on you, Professor," Solo said. "Not us."

"That's where you're wrong again, Mr. Solo. For your own sake, I urge you to listen to me, and stop throwing away your last chance to stop that train before I am forced to destroy it."

For a moment the engineer's sharp, cutting laughter was the only sound in the cab.

Illya stared at the engineer, but spoke to Finnish. "Afraid you're missing an urgent point, Professor. You may well destroy this train, or this whole rail pattern in order to stop us. But it doesn't really matter, Professor, whether we die in your train or at the hands of your soldiers. Does it?"

Finnish said, "But I know your idealistic souls too well, Mr. Kuryakin. You will face peril. But will you force others to die with you?"

Illya glanced at Solo. He said into the speaker, "Go on. I'm listening."

"There are many other people aboard that train at this moment.

Innocent people caught aboard it when you stole it. Will you sacrifice them to a foolish attempt to escape, an attempt doomed to certain failure? Must these people die with you? That is your decision, gentlemen. Clearly, I will permit them to die—I can look only at the greater good. But will you doom them?"

Neither Illya nor Solo spoke. The train whipped through a tunnel so narrow that the white light tubing was only inches from the cab window, an endless glow worm wriggling eternally through this maze of caverns.

The speaker crackled. Finnish's voice deepened the tension inside the cab. "I must ask you to make your decision quickly. Your time is running out."

The engineer turned, his jaws sagging. "Listen to the master! Do as he tells you, before it is too late for all of us."

Finnish spoke. "The engineer gives you wise counsel."

Solo drew a deep breath. "Sorry, Professor. I can't make a decision. I think you're bluffing."

Finnish wheezed, gasping, the sounds magnified on the speaker: "You're a fool. That river you saw through the glass wall in my quarters should have warned you."

Solo drew a deep breath, remembering the raging waters, the blind marine life.

"I'm listening."

Finnish said, "That's it, Mr. Solo. I neglected to mention to you that we down here live in constant threat of underground rivers breaking through shallow crusts and flooding. We've had to equip every tunnel with many steel, watertight doors. We can slam these doors closed every few miles, in every tunnel, making watertight compartments. Now. In seconds, Mr. Solo, I am pressing a button on a control panel in this room that will close and magnetically seal, through the use of our atomic power, steel doors.

"The door immediately ahead of you will close. It will be like driving that train over a hundred miles an hour into solid wall. Don't take my word. Ask the engineer there in the cab with you. He knows that he stands to die with you."

The engineer cried out in panic. "We'll slam into that steel wall, this whole train! Demolished!"

Finnish said, "Your engineer doesn't lie to you, Mr. Solo. And I do not bluff."

"Listen to him!" the engineer raged, trembling.

Finnish said, raspingly: "Your time is running out, Mr. Solo. I will no longer tolerate your interference."

Solo drew a deep breath. He glanced at Illya, but Kuryakin did not speak. His face showed nothing.

Solo lowered his gun. He nodded toward the engineer. "Stop it."

He waited, but there was no

sounds of triumph from the control room. There was no elation, no astonishment expressed. There had been but this one answer from the start.

"It was as I told you," the engineer said.

Illya gazed at the fat man, but did not speak. Solo stared through the cab window as the train slowed.

"The door!" The engineer whispered.

Holding his breath, Solo thrust his head out the cab window. Gleaming steel plates reflected the headlights of the engine.

He did not speak even when the train rolled to a stop only inches from the watertight wall of steel.

The engineer cut the engines to idle. The train gasped, sounding almost like the master himself.

Soldiers ran along the walks, dun-clad men with guns held at ready. They came up the steps. The engineer took the guns from Illya and Solo. Neither of them protested.

With smug smiles the soldiers surrounded them.

ACT IV
INCIDENT OF THE INCREDIBLE EARTHQUAKE

PROFESSOR LEONARD FINNISH remained crouched over the television monitoring screen in the control room until the stolen streamliner had been returned to the loading yard.

He sighed heavily then and stood up.

A minister spoke at his shoulder. "Are the soldiers to slay the prisoners, Master?"

"No reason to permit them to live any longer, sire," another suggested.

Finnish lifted a pudgy hand, palm outward. "I want those men bound and alive, aboard two of the atomic warhead trains. My plans for them have not altered."

"They've caused you much grief, Master."

"That's right." Finnish wheezed, held out his hand for an oxygen flask which was instantly supplied him. He placed the cone against his nostrils, inhaled hungrily. "I want them alive when the atomic warheads explode. This will be a warning to any who might come after them, even from the ranks of the ambitious, or foolhearted, among our own people."

A minister exhaled heavily. "A wise decision, Master."

Finnish laughed flatly. "Wise or not, the point is, it *is* mine."

Lights flared red from every monitoring panel, from the walls.

Finnish straightened. He said, "Red alert. A message from our THRUSH contact!"

"It's here, Master!"

A monitor lifted his arm, waving it.

Finnish pressed the oxygen cone over his nostrils and waddled through the aisles of control ma-

chines to the instant-bulletin screen.

The screen flared brightly red. Finnish shoved the monitor aside, pressed a button. "Finnish speaking. What is the message?"

A woman's voice crackled in the room. "Top priority urgency. Red alert. THRUSH advised seconds ago that United Command agents on the earth's surface have discovered your Indiana below-ground train elevator shaft, and the secret spur lines. Red alert. All plans to this moment must be altered to operation Four Strike. Repeat. Delay of even hours will jeopardize success of Operation Four Strike. Repeat. Red Alert. Repeat."

Finnish slapped the off-switch, silencing the speaker.

The bulletin screens continued to flicker brilliantly red.

Finnish leaned a moment against a machine, breathing deeply of the oxygen. Then he pressed control button panels on inter-com boards.

He spoke slowly, wheezing, but his voice was cold, without emotion: "Operation Four Strike now activated. Leonard Finnish speaking, activating Operation Four Strike. Load atomic warheads for immediate dispatch. Repeat. Load warheads for immediate dispatch."

TWO

THE STONE door slid open upon the sodden mass of human beings in the many-tiered chamber of zombies.

At gunpoint, Solo and Illya was thrust into the chamber. The door slid closed behind them.

Almost at once, Solo pressed his fingertips to his temples, the throbbing inside them immediately intolerable.

Illya pressed close to him, pushed one of the small oxygen flasks into his hand. "Use it secretly. Our half-blind friends are watching every move we make in here."

Solo nodded, but slumped heavily against a wall, burying his face against it. He breathed deeply through the flask nose cone.

After a moment, Solo felt the pressure of Illya's hand on his shoulder. "I've been thinking, Napoleon. Why didn't they kill us? Why did they return us here? Why did they let us live?"

"I don't know. Except that means, Finnish is insane enough that he means to have his vengeance because we stole his precious train—"

"Exactly! And we almost escaped. He can't let his people believe such a thing can happen. Not that it's feasible, or worth attempting—"

"He means to use us as horrible examples. He means to have us die the most appalling way his mind can conceive—"

"Perhaps on the warhead train."

"Right. He gets rid of us, and demonstrates to any dissenters in his ranks what can happen to them if they defy him."

"That's his plan, if we stand still for it."

"You don't really think we can get out of here again, do you?"

"I don't know. Maybe that depends on how big a diversionary action we can stir up."

Solo moved along the wall until he found one of the nerve gas valves. With material torn from a litter, he blocked it. He went running along the wall, looking for the next one.

Illya ran after him. He caught Solo's arm. "They're watching us on monitoring screens."

"Sure! That's it. They've got to kill us to stop us! If they shoot us in here, they lose us as horrible examples. That's up to them. Suppose we got enough oxygen into this place that the zombies woke up, or even came half awake?"

Illya laughed suddenly. "Oh, I'm with you."

"Then find these valves. Block them."

Illya was already moving away from him, going along the walls. He located a head of an oxygen hose. He smashed the nozzle. Pure oxygen gushed past him through the broken valve.

By the time they'd blocked the nerve gas valves and smashed the nozzles on the oxygen pipes, some of the zombies nearest the oxygen lines were stirring, straightening, crying out.

"I hope their cameras are picking this up!" Illya shouted.

Solo moved between the rows of waking people. He found Harrison Howell squatting like a Buddha.

Solo knelt before the philanthropist. He pressed the cone of the oxygen flask over Howell's nostrils.

Howell stirred, shaking himself. He straightened, gazing blankly at Solo.

Solo caught him by the arms, shaking him.

Howell tried to slap the oxygen flask from his face. Solo pressed it more tightly over his nostrils.

As Howell returned to consciousness, Solo spoke to him rapidly, giving him a quick picture of where he was, why he was here.

At last Howell shook himself, like a wet dog.

I know now," he said. "I was on the train. It suddenly plunged down into the earth."

"A man named Finnish," Solo said, voice urgent. "He's gone mad. He means to attack the U.S. with four atomic warheads, unless we can stop him."

Howell nodded. "Leonard Finnish. Yes. I know that name. So that's why I'm here. I've read everything I could find that Finnish wrote before he disappeared. It made a pattern to me—insane, but there it was.

"Finnish believed a world existed in the core of the earth. I figured that he'd found that world. I was on that train, on my way to Death Valley. I believed I could

find the way down here. I believed I could find Leonard Finnish. But I had no idea he was hatching a nightmare plot like this."

"Did you tell anyone your suspicions?"

"Sure. Told everybody who'd listen. Some who wouldn't. Word got down here to Finnish, all right. That's why I'm here. He had to stop me before I wrecked his plan."

"We've still got to stop him."

Howell nodded. "What can I do?"

"Plenty. We want to give Finnish and his fat madmen fits. As these people revive, get them stirred up; cause as much confusion as you can."

Howell stood up. "I understand. Leave it to me."

Illya came through the slowly waking crowds of people. He and Solo moved toward the stone door. "I've one of these door controls left," he said, holding the electronic device in his hand.

But they did not reach the door before it slid back into the wall.

The wailing of whistles, continuous and ear-splitting, washed into the chamber. Along the walks people ran, shouting. Trains idled in the yards; everything was a milling mass of activity.

Only one person seemed calm, controlled, self-contained. Mabel Finnish came through the door. Her face was chilled, her pace unhurried. She fixed a gun on Solo and Illya.

"Stay where you are, Mr. Solo," she said.

"Friend of yours, Napoleon?" Illya inquired.

"We've met," Solo said, watching Mabel's chilled face.

"My grandfather is too busy at the moment to bother about two such unimportant obstacles as you," Mabel said. "But I'm not. I mean to keep you checkmated until grandfather is ready for you."

"Well, I'm pleased you found your grandfather," Solo said in irony. Beyond Mabel, the frantic people rushed along the walks. Solo ignored the fevered activity as Mabel did, and his flat tone matched hers.

Mabel's mouth pulled bitterly. "I found my grandfather, Mr. Solo. Five years ago."

"I suspected you probably had," he said. "You weren't really worried about him, and you seemed to know where you were going better than I did."

She shrugged. "Why not? I've been traveling these routes for almost five years."

"Your grandfather's contact with THRUSH," Solo said it for her.

"Who better?" she asked.

Solo nodded. "Who indeed? I figured it had to be that way."

"You're not that clever, Mr. Solo."

"You wrong me. I am. Just that clever. I put nerve gas antidote in your coffee on that mountain trail,

but you pretended to be knocked out by that gas, though it barely affected me at all. It was a little late, but I realized what your chore was at that ranch—to keep me, or anyone, from interfering before your grandfather got his deadly plan into operation."

"That's still my only objective, Mr. Solo."

"Only it won't work."

"If you move, I'll kill you," she said.

"With that gun?" Solo inquired.

Something flickered in her eyes. Then she straightened. "Test me, and see."

"Isn't that the gun you threatened me with in Wyoming?"

Scowling, Mabel nodded.

"You should have used it on me, then," Solo said. "I removed the lead from your cartridge because I was afraid to trust you, even then. And you know what? I still am."

Mabel's voice rose slightly "You're bluffing!"

Solo glanced at Illya, nodded, then moved forward. Point blank, Mabel fired.

Solo kept walking. Illya followed him. Panic washed across Mabel's eyes. She fired again, pressing the trigger. The gun exploded but nothing happened.

Solo snagged her arm, removed the gun from her hand. Expertly he reloaded it with clips from her own jacket.

He pressed the gun into the small of her back.

"Let's go see grandpa," he told her.

The wailing whistles continued screaming through all the caverns. Guards ran ploddingly along the walks. Solo saw the four trains, idling, ready to move out in four directions.

But they did not go near them. With Mabel walking just ahead of them, they moved upward to the control room.

Two guards barred their way. Solo pressed the gun against Mabel's spine. She jerked her head at the guards and they stepped aside.

Leonard Finnish heeled around from a control panel when Solo spoke his name.

All the people in the control room came to attention, peering in desperate, nearsighted concentration at Illya, Solo and Finnish's granddaughter.

Finnish squinted, gazing at them, locating the gun in Solo's hand. He breathed deeply from an oxygen flask, then laid it aside, laughing.

He wheezed with laughter. "So you have broken free again, have you? Very commendable. But you are too late. Perhaps Mabel was unable to stop you, but it doesn't matter."

"I'm sorry, grandfather," Mabel whispered.

Finnish laughed again, in wheezing exultance. "It doesn't matter, my child. You have done well. You delayed our enemies just long

enough!" He swung his arm toward a bank of monitoring screens. "Look at them! There they go! Racing on our own underground freeways! Four atomic-laden trains! Four trains on automatic pilot—four trains set to explode simultaneously. So you can see, Mr. Solo, you're late. Much too late!"

Stunned, Solo and Illya stood watching the atomic-loaded trains rush toward their targets.

Finnish peered at them, drinking deep satisfaction from their defeat. Then he pressed a button. The guards rushed in from outside the control room.

"All right!" Finnish said, breathing painfully. "They've seen enough. Take them out into the city streets where all can see and kill them. Put their bodies through the hatches into the river."

The guards raised their guns, advancing.

Illya grabbed Mabel, arm about her waist, using her as a shield between himself and the armed guards.

He retreated, holding Mabel tightly against him. The guards ran forward, then paused, hesitant.

They stared at Finnish, uncertainly.

The huge man yelled at them. "Shoot!"

Still the guards hesitated, unable to believe what they heard.

"Shoot!" Finnish raged, wheezing.

Illya backed between the panel boards, searching.

"Stop him! Shoot!" Finnish shouted.

Mabel screamed, shaking her head. "Grandfather! No!"

Finnish seemed not even to hear her. She no longer existed for him, except as a temporary obstacle.

"Shoot! Stop him! I don't care how! Stop him!"

The guards advanced, but still they hesitated. Gasping for breath, raging, Finnish lumbered toward the nearest guard, jerked the gun from his arms.

Finnish turned, quivering, holding the gun in his fat hands.

As Finnish fired, Solo lunged toward him, slapping the gun upward.

The gun exploded, the sound re-

verberating in the control room, the sensitive machines reacting, lights flaring.

Mabel sagged forward. Illya stared at her a moment, unable to believe the old man had shot her. He released her and she sank slowly to the floor. She did not move. She was dead.

Solo ripped the gun from Finnish's arms. The rotund man staggered forward, falling against a computer.

The guard whirled toward Illya, but Solo fired. The guard dropped the gun. He took a forward step, then fell as if he tripped over unseen rope.

He toppled against a machine, clutching at it as he slid down it to the floor.

Illya ran along the banks of panel controls until he found the one he sought.

Finnish stared at him, his eyes magnified behind their thick lenses. Gasping for breath, the rotund man could barely speak.

"Stop him!" he whispered.

He said it again, hopelessly, looking all around him, speaking to nobody in particular.

As if in trances, the other men stood unmoving, watching Finnish.

Illya ran his hand down the panel of watertight door controls. He slapped every button, closing doors in every tunnel all through the maze of underground caverns.

Finnish cried out, pressing his hands at his throat, wailing.

Illa grabbed up a stool then and smashed the control panel. Lights and fires flared through it. Illya kept smashing with the stool until the sparks no longer flew from the wrecked machine.

Finnish slumped against a computer, clinging to it. He stared at Illya, shaking his head. "Those doors. Now—they can never—be opened."

Illya turned, panting. His eyes were wild with excitement.

"Never be opened!" Finnish wheezed.

"That's the way it crumbles, grandpa!" Illya said.

Finnish shook his head, barely able to speak. "Four atomic bombs, smashing into those steel plates! This whole region! Everything! Destroyed!"

Illya stared at Finnish a moment, then jerked his head toward Solo. "I suggest we get—out of here."

The green-clad men stood unmoving for one more moment, then as if all were released at once, they bolted for the doors.

Sobbing for breath, Finnish sagged against the computer, watching his underlings lumber clumsily, running for exits.

"Fools," he gasped after them. "You fools! Where do you think you'll run to?"

Finnish looked around him. His gray face was rigid, his eyes bleak. His mouth parted widely and he gasped for breath. He slapped his

hand around, seeking an oxygen flask, but finding none within reach or sight.

He sank to his knees, sobbing. He sagged forward then, covering his head with his arms. He stayed there, rocking, crying, gasping for breath.

Illya ran across the empty room, a place of brightly lighted computers, busy panels, all clattering away in a suddenly, tragically doomed world.

Neither Solo nor Illya looked back. They raced along the white-tiled corridors toward the tunnels where the whistles screamed and people milled in panic.

"Solo!"

Howell yelled at them, standing in the atomic-powered elevator. The huge lift was crowded with people from the chamber, and with many green-clad beings huddled together.

Solo and Illya raced across the cavern toward the elevator.

They leaped into it, going past Harrison Howell at the controls, fighting past the green zombies.

Howell pressed the *up* button, and the atomic-powered lift erupted upward.

Solo and Illya, staring at each other, braced themselves against the first explosions that had to come from below, when the first of those trains plowed into those steel plates.

The elevator raced upward. They were conscious of barely breathing, of the increased tension as they awaited something that had to happen.

The elevator shuddered, striking its upper moorings. Solo yelled and people crowded past him, racing up the long incline toward lighted exits in the craggy, dark mountainsides.

An explosion rocked the earth. People fell, screaming. Illya was thrown against the cavern wall. He rebounded, shouting.

"Seismographs will go crazy tonight!" Illya yelled.

Another explosion shook the earth.

"Earthquakes they'll never believe," Illya shouted. He was knocked to his knees. He was aware of Solo, grabbing his arm, half-lifting him as they ran toward safety.

Another explosion rattled the foundations of the world. People screamed around them. Both Illya and Solo were slammed to the ground, and they clung to it as the elevator shaft slowly crumbled into itself.

They fought to their knees, running again, aware of the earth crumbling behind them.

"Another one coming!" Illya yelled. "This ought to rock your teeth!"

"Hang on," Solo shouted. He looked back over his shoulder, saw Illya at his heels, and he ran faster, going toward the sunlight above them.

THE LADY IS A LAWYER

Five hours they had given him—five desperate hours to find a girl's murderer—or follow her to the morgue . . .

by LEO R. ELLIS

THE BELL CLAMOR beat a stinging tattoo against my ear drums, jangling the nerve ends. I cursed and reached out for the alarm shut-off button. I fingered only empty air where the bedside table should have been.

The bedlam continued to bore in like a dentist drill, until it reached my brain. There it rasped against my conscious mind, until the aroused cells informed me this was not the steady ring of an alarm clock. The sound was a telephone —which was odd, because I had no telephone in my apartment.

With a mighty effort I opened my eyes and gazed at a mauve tinted ceiling, where the plaster should have been painted a dirty brown.

The telephone bell stopped in mid-ring, and I sat up from the abrupt, sudden silence.

I was fully dressed and on a sofa. Sunshine poured in from between silken drapes. The mauve walls and French provincial furniture

baffled me for a moment; then the pieces began to fall into place. I yelled out for Henry Manners.

Nothing happened, so I got to my feet. I wavered, and almost went down from the nausea belt in the belly. My head felt like a balloon on the end of a string. I pinched my eyelids together and opened them again to check my watch. It was eleven o'clock in the morning.

I made bad taste sounds with my lips and tongue. That last drink Henry mixed had really clobbered me. I saw a closed door, and I steered a course across the deep carpeting to ask Henry Manners the score.

I twisted the knob, and stumbled into a boudoir of pink and white froth, with enough frills to build a truck load of French pastry.

On my way out I saw the tenant, a girl, spread-eagled on a canopied bed, her silver lamé evening gown pushed hip-high. She still wore silver sandals, but not much else. A shredded little pile of nylon lay on the floor beside the bed. My eyes traveled up over the curves, to where a mass of blond hair sprawled across the face. Her features were hidden, all but her scarlet lips, open, frozen in midscream.

I had seen only two dead bodies in my short life; this made it three. There was no doubt this was a corpse—the way her head was cocked to one side, as if she had heard a strange sound, or was trying to locate an obscure spot on the ceiling.

I backed out of the boudoir, trying to lose last night's drinks on the way.

At first I tried to write the whole thing off as a bad dream, but that didn't wash. The girl on the bed was real. Then what was I, Scott Laird, clean living American boy, doing in a murder? I had never jammed up before, except for a couple of fraternity didos at the university. I didn't fit in this deal; in fact I didn't even fit in this apartment.

It took only a moment to make sure I was alone with the body. The girl hadn't been here when Henry Manners brought me to his apartment—or had she? I couldn't remember whether the bedroom door had been closed the night before. I hadn't been here long, only time for a couple of drinks.

The drink rang a bell and I stepped over to where my highball sat on a coffee table. That last drink must have been doped. The inch of amber fluid left in the glass gave off no odor, but my nose might have gone as dead as my brain.

A knock on the door made me set the glass down fast. The knock was repeated, more insistent this time.

"Miss Bentley," a man called from outside. "Miss Bentley, are you there?"

I wasn't about to answer questions, not until I knew a few of the

answers. The deep carpet pile muffled my footsteps as I crossed the room and entered the kitchen.

"Miss Bentley!" The voice sounded alarmed now, and a key grated in the lock as I reached the service door.

A flight of steps led down, then another flight and I hurried along a hallway. A laundry room stood on one side, but I opened the opposite door and looked into an underground garage.

A man with a grease gun stepped from around a car. He watched me stride across the garage and out the alley.

I circled around to the street. I stopped to take stock. Half a pack of cigarettes, and most of my week's pay, which wasn't much, once they had deducted from a shipping clerk's salary. But at least I hadn't been rolled.

The tall apartment house stood on a steep hill, with the street in front running at a sharp angle down to Sunset Boulevard. Tall, twin palm trees stood in front of the building, the kind every apartment house with class must have in Southern California. I remembered the trees; I'd parked my old Chevie in front of one last night. Now that space at the curb stood empty.

I cursed Henry Manners for taking my car and walked down the hill.

This was the 'Strip', a winding section of Sunset Boulevard on the west outskirts of Los Angeles. The place is loaded with nightclubs, posh eateries, art shoppes, drive-ins and crackpots. I didn't fit into any of these categories; Scott Laird was a square working stiff from downtown.

A cab cruised by. I ignored him and crossed the street to a bus stop. A bus driver wouldn't remember a fare the way a cabbie would. Right now I wanted to stay anonymous.

While I waited, a black and white patrol car streaked by with siren howling. It made the sharp turn into the side street and climbed the hill to the apartment house. The sight gave me a chill, but I didn't panic. I figured once I got out of the vicinity, I'd be in the clear. It was Henry's apartment; he'd have to explain the body, not me.

I started to light a cigarette, then dropped the match when something worse than a chill hit me. Fingerprints—I'd left my prints in the murder apartment from hell to breakfast. I hadn't thought to wipe off a thing I had touched. If the police picked me up now, they had evidence aplenty I had been there.

It was a hot, slow bus ride from the Strip to downtown Los Angeles and I had plenty of time to muse. I was still baffled. Yesterday I hadn't a woe to my name, today I had woes up to my ears.

That wasn't the way things happened to Scott Laird; nice things

generally happened easy to me, like the athletic scholarship at the university. All I had to do was to lug a football up and down the field on Saturdays. The crowds loved me. The girls went for Scott Laird; the boys liked me. So did the sports-writers—the pro teams didn't.

It had been a bumper year for halfbacks last season. The pros had their pick and choose, and they hadn't chosen any six foot, one hundred and eighty pound halfbacks, unless they were superstars. Scott Laird had been only a star.

The rejection hadn't been the end of the world, and with Uncle Sam breathing down my neck, I'd decided to go into the service. This shipping clerk job down here in L.A. had been only a stopgap while I waited for my commission to come through.

The sun had started to slide down the other side of the sky when I arrived home. This place didn't much resemble the apartment house on the Strip. This one was old, tired and squeezed in between two taller buildings. My apartment house didn't even rate a shrub in front.

Before I entered, I noticed two men in a parked car. I climbed the stairs, and when I reached the third floor landing, a cop came out of a door, halfway down the hall. I didn't stop to ask what he was doing in my apartment, but took the remaining steps two at a time.

I paused at the top to look down through the narrow space between the railings. One of the men from the car had already reached the second floor. I pushed the door open and stepped out on the roof, out on a barren stretch of tar and gravel, broken only by an oasis of wet wash along one side.

I ran over to the fire wall. The next building was set a few feet over, which left an air and viewing space for the apartment dwellers. Only one thing extended from the roof to the ground, an iron vent pipe fastened to the side of the building. I swung a leg over, grabbed the pipe and worked my way down.

Once my hand slipped and skinned my knuckles on the stucco wall. I hadn't thought much when I started, but by the time I reached the second floor, I realized this was no escape route. Only one plain-clothesman had followed me up the stairs; that meant his partner remained in front. No doubt they had another man posted at the rear.

Evidently this house had been built before the others, when there had been a view from the windows. A few feet from the pipe, an ornamental balcony clung to the wall under a pair of French windows. I worked my handkerchief out, dabbed blood off my knuckles and dropped the cloth. My hope was that the cops would think I had reached the ground and had escaped.

With a foot braced against the pipe, I extended my arm as far as possible and shoved off. The balcony edge hit my hand. I clung, swung and prayed the rusty bolts wouldn't pull out of the wall. They held. I pulled myself up and climbed through the windows.

THE APARTMENT was similar to mine, except that this one had been furnished with a desk. A bookcase stood against the wall, loaded with heavy volumes.

The sound of a shower running behind the closed bathroom door told me the tenant was home. I tip-toed over. A pair of men's shorts were neatly draped over a chair back and I held them up for size. I shouldn't have any trouble handling this fellow. I wouldn't need a weapon; a punch in the jaw should put him in line if he caused trouble.

The water sound stopped and I took a stance in front of the door, my right arm cocked as a persuader. The door opened, but I didn't pull the trigger. Standing before me, with skin aglow, stood a girl. I had time to take inventory; a rather small thing, narrow waisted, fully developed and with rounded hips. She snatched a towel and held it in front of her body.

Now I saw her face, with its pert nose, stubborn little chin and wavy, chestnut hair.

I expected a scream, but she regarded me with a pair of level gray eyes.

"What are you doing in my apartment?" she asked sternly.

This was a perfect spot for a wisecrack, but none came. "Take it easy, lady, and you won't get hurt."

She ignored my threat and nodded toward the chair.

"Hand me my underwear. You'll find my robe hanging inside the dressing room door."

I picked up the shorts, and found a man's bathrobe in the dressing room. I handed them over and walked back across the room. I thought I knew the female sex. At school I had catalogued them all, but this dame didn't seem to fit into any of the slots. I lit a cigarette and I flipped the match into a waste basket.

I stood and pondered on what line I should use on this particular female type. She didn't give me long to ponder, for a moment later the bathroom door opened.

The boy-size robe reached from her chin to her ankles. She had applied no makeup, and the comb she had run through her hair had made it more rumpled than combed. She strode across the room in flat sandals and drew herself up. She folded her arms. "Well?"

I flipped the cigarette through the window. "I could give you a snow job about stumbling into the wrong apartment, but I won't."

"Good."

"There is a cop in my apartment downstairs. There are more of them

in front, and behind the building, and they're all out for my scalp."

"For a criminal, you're quite straightforward," she said. "Your name is Scott Laird—the police have already been here. I suppose they have covered all the apartments, asking questions."

She stopped to examine me like a horse buyer. "Their description was accurate: Athletic build, clipped red hair and freckles. They even mentioned the wide grin," she added.

The cleaning woman must have given them my description, I thought. I'd used the grin on her plenty to get extra bath towels.

"That all sounds like me," I said.

"They even know about your plaid sports jacket and the tan slacks."

That had come from the man with the grease gun. He had a good look at me in the underground garage. "They might have my description, but that doesn't make me a criminal."

"It makes you a fugitive."

This icicle was beginning to bug me. Dames are wonderful and necessary creatures—when they act like dames. I like my girls pliant, soft and cuddly. This thing had all the basic equipment to be a knockout, but she ruined the whole deal by a shapeless robe and making like a district attorney.

"I may be a fugitive," I said, irritated. "But I intend to straighten that matter out as soon as I find Henry Manners." I turned on her. "You might at least give me your name."

"Jo Fenwick—Miss Fenwick," she added quickly.

I looked around the apartment and compared the plain, severe efficiency with the frilly concoction of that boudoir on the Strip.

"It is my understanding that the police want you in connection with the death of a girl," Miss Fenwick said. "What is your defense?"

"I don't have a defense. I don't need a defense, and if I ever need one, I'll get myself a lawyer."

"You have a lawyer, Mr. Laird."

I sat on the sofa and stared. "You're kidding."

Miss Fenwick's stubborn little chin came out. "I am an attorney-at-law, Mr. Laird. I passed the bar examination over a month ago, and now I am accredited to practice law in this state." She faced me, her hands placed on her hips. "I realized this was a great opportunity when I saw you outside the bathroom door." She pointed her finger. "You, Mr. Laird, are to be my first client."

"Oh no you don't!" I yelled. "I'll pick my own lawyer, and if I need one, it sure won't be a woman."

That touched off the fuse. She advanced on me, her fists clenched. She leaned over, her face almost in mine.

"Don't you pull that superior male attitude on me," she stormed. "I am a competent member of the

bar, who happens to be a woman. In the future, you'll kindly forget that I am a member of the opposite sex."

"That's going to be tough to do, the way your robe is tied."

She clutched the robe and began to pace again.

"I'll not tolerate discrimination," she said. "I'll defeat it at every turn." She strode back and looked down at me. "You're in no position to discriminate, Mr. Laird. In fact, you have no choice in the matter. If I decide to open that door—" She stopped and pointed.

She didn't have to finish the threat. This female lawyer had me. Actually it might not be too bad. At least it wouldn't hurt to play along with her until I got my hands on Henry Manners. Once I made him talk, I wouldn't need a lawyer.

I managed a weak grin. "Okay, legal beagle. Go ahead and make like a lawyer."

"I'll ignore the sarcasm," she said and rubbed her hands together. "First, tell me everything you know about this girl's death."

This didn't take long. But as I talked, Miss Fenwick made notes, paced the floor and generally acted efficient.

"Now tell me about Henry Manners," she said when I had finished.

This took longer. I explained how Manners had also been a student at the university—a skinny, rich kid who drove a Jag and liked to be seen with football players. "Manners generally hung out with the weirdos, the beards," I said. But when he learned I needed a summer job, he landed me one with his father's engineering firm down here in L.A."

"Then he wasn't a close friend."

I shook my head. "We went out together a couple of times down here. Yesterday he showed up at work without his car. I drove him to the Full Moon—that's a little

joint I know. Later, I took him out to a private club on the Strip, then he wanted to go back to his apartment."

"How much did you have to drink?"

I thought back. "We had a couple at the Full Moon, another one at the Penguin Colony and two at the apartment. The last one was doped," I said.

Miss Fenwick paced some more, looked at the clock on the desk and snapped on the television. "It's time for a newscast. Perhaps we'll find out some more about our case."

The girl's murder didn't rate with the international news, or even with the national events. It wasn't stuck down with the weather report, and we both learned forward when the announcer said, "The body of a young woman was discovered this morning in her West Los Angeles apartment—"

"Her apartment!" I yelped. "Henry Manners told me that was his place."

"—the nearly nude body of a young lady, identified as Kit Bentley, an employe of a night spot—"

I knew Kit Bentley. At least Henry Manners had introduced us last night at the Penguin Colony. I sat there and waited for more sneak punches. The announcer told how Miss Bentley's agent had attempted to call her—that explained the telephone ringing. When Miss Bentley failed to answer, the agent had alerted the manager, who had entered the apartment with a pass key and found the body.

"The police are searching for a young suspect seen leaving the apartment house," the announcer went on. "An abandoned car was found near the scene of the crime."

The camera cut to an exterior shot. I saw my old Chevie, only no longer parked by the palm tree. A uniformed cop stood by, while a crowd of people gaped and waved in the background.

"No wonder they picked up my trail so fast," I said. "They got my name and address from the registration slip in my car."

When the announcer went on to other news, Miss Fenwick turned off the television. "It appears this case isn't as simple as you led me to believe."

I had to agree. The apartment belonged to the girl, not Henry Manners. The police had my car, and they knew I had been at the scene of the murder.

"I'll still get the truth when I get hold of Manners," I growled. "I'll wring it out of him."

"Now you said you had been out with Henry Manners before. Where did you go?"

I told her about the Lifeline, a joint down on the beach. It had been a crummy spot, populated by the same characters Manners had hung out with in school. The patrons I could take or leave, but the owner of the Lifeline was a different matter.

"This fellow was a real slob," I said. "He weighed close to three hundred pounds, all black beard and belly. He must have mistaken me for a good friend of Manners. When this slob found I was going into the service, he went into his pitch on how much I could help the cause as an officer of the armed forces."

Miss Fenwick looked shocked. "You mean the Communist cause?"

I shrugged. "What else? When I got the drift, I called him a hairy pig and swung at his jaw. It was no contest—the other creeps all jumped in. They roughed me up some and gave me the old heave-ho. I took a taxi home." I remembered something and pulled a card from my wallet. "The hairy pig gave me this card before he went into his proposition."

The card was blank, except for a telephone number scribbled on one side. I walked to the phone on the desk and punched out the number. A distant ring, then came a man's voice—obviously a recording.

"—awake, Americans. You are being dragged into the maw of senseless, total war. Your sons and brothers are being sacrificed on the altar of political greed. Innocent people are being murdered by American troops—people whose only crime is their love of personal freedom. Awake, America—"

I handed the receiver to Miss Fenwick. She listened with a growing look of disgust. Slowly she put the phone back into the cradle.

"I believe you," she said. After another fast tour around the room, she stopped. "You said you worked for an engineering firm. Do they work on government contracts?"

I got her drift. "Sure, but I'm nothing. I work in a warehouse downtown, and when I make a delivery out at the plant, I don't get past the dock. That place makes Fort Knox look like open house. I understand they're working on research and development on top secret material, but I don't know whether it's fly swatters or death rays."

"We can't overlook this subversive angle entirely." Miss Fenwick tapped her fingers on the desk top in thought. "But right now we should try to get in touch with Henry Manners."

I cursed myself for not having thought of the telephone before. I grabbed the directory and looked up the Manners home number. But when I picked up the instrument, she took it from my hand.

"As your lawyer, I'll handle this."

I fumed some, and argued, but finally saw her logic. If I called, and blew my stack, Manners would turn the matter over to the police. I watched her dial the number. She spoke to someone, then replaced the telephone.

"Henry Manners is not at home —presently," she said. "I spoke to

a servant, a man with an accent." She sighed and turned away. She looked suddenly tired. "It seems the only thing to do now is to turn you over to the police."

I jumped into the air. "Are you nuts, woman? I thought you were on my side."

"It's the only way," she said stubbornly. "This is the legal way to handle the case. You must understand that an attorney-at-law is both an officer of the court, as well as the agent of his client. I can't willingly allow you to remain a fugitive. As my client—"

"As your ex-client," I yelled and started for the French windows. I was through playing games. From now on I meant to make things grim.

"Wait, where do you think you're going?"

I had one foot outside. "To find Henry Manners, of course."

Miss Fenwick brought her hand up to cover her mouth. She stared at me with big eyes. "The police will shoot you. They believe you're a murderer."

"I'll have to take that chance." I climbed out on the balcony. "Just sit on that legal conscience of yours for five minutes; that's all I'll ask of you."

"Come on back in here," Miss Fenwick said, and I saw her shoulders had slumped. "I won't call the police."

I came back in and crossed the room. I knew it had been a tough decision, and I felt sorry for the girl.

"I'll make a deal to ease your conscience," I said. "If you won't call the police, I'll give myself up after I find Henry Manners." I put out my hand.

"Gentleman's agreement?" she said.

"Gentleman's agreement." We shook hands solemnly. "I'll put myself in your hands, after I find Manners."

Her manner changed abruptly. "You can't go out in those clothes. You'll have to stay here. You can sleep on the sofa. I'll get some bedding somewhere—"

"Right now I'm not interested in sleeping." I took out my wallet and counted out half the bills. "Get dressed and find a second hand store. Get a suit, size forty-two, long. Buy a hat too, to cover my red hair."

I walked over and looked into the bathroom. "I'll need a shower and shave. Do you have a razor?"

"There is an electric razor on the shelf. I imagine it will shave a man's beard."

"Good." I didn't check to see if she had obeyed, but went inside and closed the door. After the shower and shave, the world rosied up considerably.

Half an hour later, Miss Fenwick returned. She looked about as I had imagined she would in street clothes—pert, but efficient in a tailored suit, sensible shoes and her

hair tumbled up around her ears. I took the bundle, stripped down to my shorts and donned a muddy brown suit.

I pulled the hat low and surveyed myself in the mirror. "Not what I would have picked," I said. "But it will do."

"Well, thank you."

"You're welcome." I walked across the room with Miss Fenwick close at my heels. I grasped the door knob and turned. "I do appreciate what you've done for me. I'll keep in touch."

She firmed her lips. Her gray eyes took on the flinty cast I had seen before, and the stubborn chin came out. "The police are outside. I saw them. They'll stop you, but as a couple we might get through." She let this sink in. "Besides, I have a car."

The transportation came as a clincher. I might have to travel far and fast to locate Manners, and a man without a car in Los Angeles was a man without legs.

"All right," I agreed. "Just don't get in my way. And remember the deal. I'm to find Henry Manners first."

WE REACHED the sidewalk without incident. I spotted the stakeout car parked across the street. We turned and walked away at a normal pace without being stopped.

Near the corner she stopped beside a blue Volkswagen. I ducked around and slid quickly under the wheel. I let her climb in without help, and she sat down, stiff and straight.

"You're acting like a male animal," she said coldly.

"I'll concede that you're an equal, but this happens to be my neck that's sticking out. The keys, please." I wiggled my fingers impatiently.

She handed them over and I drove away in silence, while I tried to figure my next move. Kit Bentley had worked at the Penguin Colony, where I had met her. Manners was well known out there, and it seemed as good a place as any to try to pick up his trail.

"We'll go out to the Penguin Colony first," I said. "It's a private club, but the bar and dining room are open to the public."

"Did Henry Manners take you back into the private section?"

"No, he sent a message back and Kit Bentley came out to the bar. Manners introduced us; then they went into a huddle. I could see that three made a crowd, so I took a cruise to the men's room. When I returned, Kit Bentley was gone."

I shot a sidelong glance at my companion. "This Kit Bentley was a looker," I said. "These girls who work in the private section wear penguin costumes—skimpy, tight little outfits. This Kit had plenty to show—lots up here, long, slender legs." I gave a low whistle.

"You don't have to go into detail," Miss Fenwick snapped.

"I thought as long as it was between us fellows—"

"I consider your narration extremely vulgar."

I shrugged.

"Sorry," I said cheerfully. "It's just that I appreciate the finer things in life."

After that we rode in deep silence. Miss Fenwick sat straight, with her eyes fixed on the street ahead and her hands clenching her bag.

We arrived at the Penguin Colony shortly after six. It was so early no attendant was yet on duty, so I parked the Volkswagen myself. The doorman hadn't arrived, and the place had a just opened look.

The bar was posh—a Hollywood production, phonied up with glittering, papier-maché icebergs. Black and white penguin figures clustered on the snow, and the backbar was rigged for an ever-changing, multi-colored aurora borealis effect. Only two men sat at the far end of the bar.

I checked the bartender in the white jacket, but couldn't decide whether he was the same one that had served us the night before.

"Two martinis," I said without asking Miss Fenwick what she drank.

I inspected the place and noticed the arch formed to look like the entrance to an ice grotto. Beyond the opening stood the dining room; empty, white tables gleaming like ice hummocks. Now that I was here, I felt frustrated. Who would I ask—what? Kit Bentley had worked here, but that wasn't much. This wasn't the sort of establishment where the employees got intimate with the customers.

I had still not decided on my next move when a waiter appeared silently at my elbow. "Mr. Henry Manners would like to speak to you, sir."

I felt a quick catch in my chest. My hunch had been right.

"Sure," I said, sliding off the stool.

The waiter gave Miss Fenwick a significant look.

"Privately," he said.

"Of course." I leaned over to Miss Fenwick. "I'll give you a full report, counselor. Keep my drink cool while I'm gone."

I gave her a tight grin and followed the waiter's back through the arch and across a corner of the dining room. He stopped at a massive door and inserted a card in a slot. A series of electronic clicks erupted in the mechanism and he pushed the door open.

He led the way down a hallway, carpeted in white. A room stood on either side of the hall, and through the open doors I saw a layout of tables and roulette wheels, all empty and silent under the shaded lights. A pair of live, curved penguins talked at one of the tables, but they scarcely looked up as we passed.

The waiter knocked at the door

at the end of the hall. He waited until a buzz sounded, then pushed the door open and stepped aside.

I entered an office and the door closed behind me. There were two men in the room—a blue-jowled character in a dinner jacket against the wall, and a man behind a desk. Neither of them was Henry Manners.

The man behind the desk looked as if he had sunk deep into the carpet pile; only his bald head and shirt front showed above the top.

"I'm David Lortig," he said in a soft, effeminate voice. "I am the owner of the Penguin Colony."

"Congratulations." I looked around the room. "Where's Henry Manners?"

Lortig got up and came around the desk. With his stubby legs, black dinner jacket and pot belly, he resembled a penguin more than the girls he dressed in costume. He regarded me with eyes sunk behind soft pouches.

"That is a very good question," he said. "Where is Henry Manners?"

"You sent word out that Manners was here."

Lortig shook his head. "A ruse. But actually, Henry Manners isn't too important at the present," he said with a wave of his hand. "The important thing is, where are those IOU's?"

The question stopped me cold. I looked down at the carpet while I fumbled in my mind for an answer. If I said I didn't know, Lortig could cut this interview off short, and being in this office was an opening. I wanted to know more.

As a stall I fumbled for a cigarette, but came up with an empty package. I crossed to the desk, took a cigarette from a silver box and returned. I pretended to concentrate while I lighted up and inhaled. The damned thing was perfumed. I blew a cloud of smoke out before I answered.

"Suppose I said I didn't know where those IOU's were, Mr. Lortig?"

"In that case I'm afraid I would be forced to call you a liar."

I let this pass, mainly because I felt, rather than heard, the blue-jowled man move away from the wall. I didn't like the setup, but I didn't turn; I studied the cigarette tip.

"I'm afraid I don't know, Mr. Lortig," I said.

Translucent lids dropped over Lortig's eyes. "The three of you have bungled this thing from the start. I've known for some time that Kit was cheating on me. I knew

she had given Henry Manners a key to her apartment, but with fifteen thousand dollars at stake, I didn't press the point." The lids lifted, exposing agate orbs. "Girls like Kit come cheaper than that by the dozen. But she stepped over the line when she stole the IOU's from my safe."

The silence in the dark office pushed down heavy around my ears. I forced myself to inhale slowly, instead of taking the cigarette down in quick puffs. Lortig had let me in on enough to figure out the rest. Manners had gambled here at the Penguin Colony. He had plunged heavily, and Lortig had accepted his IOU's. Then Manners had become chummy with Kit Bentley, Lortig's girl. She had stolen the papers, then—then I had been knocked out on the sofa, with Kit Bentley lying very dead in the boudoir.

I looked up. "How do you figure me in on the deal?"

Lortig sat down behind the desk again. He reached out, and with dowager-like fingers, grasped the silver box. He lifted and closed the lid in a monotonous cadence of clicks.

"Very simple," he said softly. "One of my bartenders saw the three of you together here last night. He notified me you were back." Click-click-click. "You were at the apartment last night. I have enough connections at headquarters to get the details—your description, and your name, Mr. Laird." Click-click-click.

This time I heard blue-jowl shuffle across the carpet behind me. My insides went chilled. I knew Lortig would never accept my explanation that I'd been an innocent sucker—framed into being in Kit Bentley's apartment last night.

I would have to come up with something better than the truth to be believed.

"What are you offering for those IOU's?" I asked as a feeler.

"Your life, Mr. Laird."

My insides went cold again. Blue-jowl cleared his throat with a rasp behind me. I didn't doubt that Lortig meant what he said—the man might look like a cherubic sissy, but he didn't have to dirty his hands when he had a goon like blue-jowl around. Lortig probably had more of the same ilk cached in the woodwork.

I'd boxed myself in by playing it cute; now I'd have to reverse my field and try to break clear. If I didn't make it on this try, I'd be thrown for a real loss.

"I never saw the IOU's," I said carefully. "Maybe Kit double-crossed Manners and didn't bring them to the apartment."

Lortig remained fishy-eyed. "They were in the safe earlier in the evening. I took Kit home after we closed, and we didn't stop anywhere on the way." Click-click-click went the box lid in the otherwise silent room. Lortig drew back

his hand and leaned back in the overstuffed throne.

"It makes no difference to me whether Manners killed Kit, or whether you did." Now he leaned forward, his eyes slits. "I'm giving you until midnight to deliver those papers to me, Laird."

I caught the signal. I saw the podgy hand raise, but I ducked too late. A gun butt crashed against the side of my head and drove me to my knees. I shook the bloody cobwebs loose in my brain, but before I could move, blue-jowl swung a size twelve shoe into my ribs. I lay on my back and stared at two faces swimming near the ceiling.

I'd never been hit like this, even on a gang tackle, and this time no trainer rushed out with smelling salts. I was strictly on my own.

"That was to let you know we mean business," the fat face said.

The fog cleared enough so I saw blue-jowl draw his foot back again. I cringed.

"No," Lortig said easily. "We want Mr. Laird to navigate—at least until midnight. Get him out of here."

Blue-jowl hauled me to my feet and walked to the door. I wobbled after him, dabbing at the side of my head. I had been given the message, and I saw no percentage in hanging around for a P.S.

As we passed the doorways, I saw a scattering of men around the gambling tables. A chubby little penguin came down the hall, bearing a tray load of drinks. Blue-jowl pulled the door open and allowed me to walk through, and then the door closed behind me with the clunk of doom.

Several patrons stood before the long bar now. Scraps of conversation and light laughter filled the air—it seemed everybody was getting their jollies in the Penguin Colony except me. Miss Fenwick still sat on the stool; out of place in this crowd as a pair of spats in a nudist camp. Her untouched martini stood on the bar. I downed this before I reached for my own half-filled glass.

I could use a few more jolts, but I couldn't see donating business to my executioner.

"Let's get out of this snake nest," I growled and headed for the door.

I LED THE WAY to the car and got in behind the wheel. Miss Fenwick climbed in, scowling, and was ready to let out with a cutting remark, when she stopped and gasped. "Your head—you've been hurt!"

"The head will heal, if they give it time." I jammed the key in, scooted the bug out of the parking lot and entered traffic. I drove grimly, and let her stew for a mile before I spoke. "Henry Manners wasn't there. That message was a trick to get me back into David Lortig's office."

I told what I had learned about the IOU's.

"It was a sweet double-cross all the way around," I said bitterly. "Henry Manners got Kit Bentley to steal the IOU's; then he murdered her. He brought me to the apartment, doped my drink and left me framed for her murder. The only hitch in his plan came when the telephone rang, and I got out before they found me there."

We drove another few blocks. "Lortig has given me until midnight to deliver those papers, or *bang, bang.*"

"But those things don't happen," Miss Fenwick said, her voice filled with indignation. "We have laws to protect a citizen's rights in a case of this kind."

"Your words relieve me no end." I took my eyes from the rear view mirror. "But I'd have more faith in your legal logic if Lortig hadn't put a tail on me. There's been a car behind us since we left the Penguin Colony."

Miss Fenwick looked back, and watched the headlights behind follow our course through the traffic. She turned back, her face a little strained now, and she didn't hand out any more high sounding phrases about a citizen's rights.

I had less than five hours in which to find Henry Manners now. Even if I didn't get my hands on the papers, I felt that Lortig would accept Manners as evidence of good faith on my part. It was a different story with the police. They wouldn't let me off the hook because I handed them another suspect.

If it ever came to an accusing match between Henry Manners and me, Manners stood to make yards on every down. He had all the horsepower—money, political influence and a father to provide a battery of high priced legal talent. Before they were through, they would prove Henry Manners had never even heard of Kit Bentley.

I had nothing going for me—well, almost nothing. I had been saddled with a female-type lawyer who had recently crawled from a textbook. If she would consent to wear a tight, low-cut dress and demand an all male jury, I might stand a chance; otherwise, I had better find Henry Manners before midnight.

On a long chance, I headed back to the spot where Manners and I had started this caper early last evening. The Full Moon had been a favorite hangout of mine since I had been in Los Angeles, not only because it was close to the warehouse, but because I liked the owner. Ace Fayer was an ex-welterweight, among his other exes. A long-faced, sad-eyed individual, Ace handled a clientele of B-girls, dips and assorted hoodlums with a minimum amount of trouble.

The stars had come out by the time we arrived in the downtown section of the city. There was mostly blackness in the commercial district. The car behind moved up clo-

ser as I made a series of turns through the maze of narrow streets.

The only glow in the block came from the single bulb over the door of the Full Moon. I pulled up to the curb and stopped. The headlights behind followed suit.

I saw Miss Fenwick shoot a look at the place, then frown.

"You insisted on coming along," I said. "I didn't promise to take you to the best places. Besides, you might be able to pick up a little business if you play your cards right. The people you'll meet in here are generally in need of legal talent."

We went through the door and I saw Miss Fenwick stiffen. She looked down her nose, and I saw the interior through her virgin eyes —the scabby walls, littered floor and grease-filmed mirror on the back bar.

I grabbed her arm and steered her around a noisy cluster of patrons and down to the far end of the bar.

"Two bourbon and sodas—double on one," I told Ace. "This is my lawyer, Jo Fenwick."

Ace grunted and reached for the bottle of bar whiskey. I waited until he had mixed the drinks and placed them before us. "You haven't seen Henry Manners, have you? He's the skinny little fellow with glasses. The one I came in with last night."

Ace kept his eyes on Miss Fenwick, as though he were trying to figure her out. "Manners was here when I came on duty at two this afternoon."

I cursed my luck for not having come to the Full Moon, instead of going to my apartment. I knew Ace well enough not to press him. I put a couple of bills on the bar.

Ace picked up my money, went to the cash register and returned.

"Manners hung around awhile after that," he said, handing out a little more information with my change. "You might talk to Betty. They had quite a confab." Ace jerked his head toward the cluster.

I spotted Betty in the bunch, talking and laughing a little louder than the rest. Betty hustled drinks for Ace, and called herself a hostess. She was rather a large girl, with not too much going for her, but she made the most of what she had.

Betty worked as hard at being a dame, as my lawyer did at being neuter.

"Send Betty back, will you, Ace?"

A few moments later the girl detached herself from the group and came by, every hump and bulge under the skin tight dress in motion. She deliberately brushed against me and continued on. I slid off the stool and followed her back to a table.

Betty hitched her chair up close to mine, and leaned over so I had a clear view down the front of her dress.

"Cigarette me, lover," she cooed.

I had made the mistake of going out with Betty once—mistake, because the girl had the instincts of a black widow spider. She tried to devour her lovers. Betty figured being loved by a college man was a status symbol, and she meant to hold her lofty position.

Now she made a production of taking a light from the match I held.

"Who's the dame?" she hissed through the cloud of smoke she blew into my face. "Or is it a dame?"

"It's my lawyer."

Betty gave Miss Fenwick a long, disdainful appraisal. "She looks like a cold fish to me."

"A popsickle. It's strictly business between us." I leaned forward. "Ace tells me you talked to Henry Manners this afternoon."

Betty lowered her lids and gazed at me through false eyelashes.

"Henry likes me," she said coyly. "He's a college man, you know. He's a real nice fellow."

"He's a crackerjack," I said through clenched teeth.

Betty took my attitude for jealousy and ate it up. She took advantage of the situation—held my hand while she simpered in my face. Time was short with me, but Betty refused to be rushed.

I glanced over a couple of times and saw my lawyer sitting stiff and straight on the stool, staring into the dirty mirror.

Through the breast heaving I managed to get some facts. Betty had hustled several drinks out of Manners, and Henry had taken on quite a load himself. He had been worried, maybe scared. Before he left, Henry Manners had told her to tell me to get in touch with him, that it was important.

I untangled myself and stood up. "Thanks for everything, sweetheart. Sometime I'll do something for you."

Betty pouted. "You didn't even buy me a drink."

I tossed a dollar bill on the table. "You'd better lay off that colored water, baby. It will rot your intestines."

On the way out, I saw the lone man hovered over an untouched beer. One of my tails had dropped in to make sure I didn't slip out the back door.

Miss Fenwick remained silent on the way out, but once we were seated in the car, she turned on me. "You certainly made an exhibition of yourself with that hussy."

I grinned to myself. "I got what I was after."

"Obviously."

"Don't be too harsh. Sometimes a redblooded male can't control his emotions, counselor."

"I wish you would stop calling me that. I have a name, you know."

"I'm sorry, *Miss Fenwick.*"

She sat for a long moment with her chin out. "I suppose you called that—that thing *miss.*"

I really grinned now.

"No," I said, pulling my face straight, "No, I called her Pussycat, Passion Flower and Dreamboat. Now if you want me to call you—"

"*Jo* will be quite sufficient," she said stiffly.

I had less than two hours until my life cycle could come to an abrupt halt. I pounded the steering wheel with my fists. If Henry Manners had doped my drink, then framed me for murder, why the sudden change of heart? Why had Manners come to the Full Moon, when he knew it was my hangout? Why did he want to see me?

I meant to find the answer to the last question, and jabbed the motor into life. "To hell with the telephone," I said. "We're going out to Henry Manners' home."

I HAD made a delivery out there once, so knew the address. It would be a long trip, with plenty of cops in between, looking for me.

The car behind us pulled away from the curb when I did. It slowed down in front of the Full Moon to pick up a passenger and then got on the trail. I drove slowly through the darkened streets. I saw a truck parked in a narrow, one-way alley and whirled the wheel over to head in. I squeezed the little Volkswagen through the narrow space, and heard metal scrape against the brick wall.

The headlights behind swung in and stopped. The driver reversed, turned and sped off, burning rubber.

I found a space in the alley, turned around and squeezed by the truck again.

I pushed down on the gas.

"They went around to try and pick us up at the other end of the alley," I said. "I hate having someone breathe down the back of my neck."

I found the winding drive in Beverly Hills, where the homes became larger and more exclusive as we climbed. The Manners' place was screened from the street by a high hedge. I parked at the curb. "This is it."

Jo Fenwick reached for the door handle on her side.

"You're staying here." When she started to protest, I grabbed her wrist. "Now you've been a good scout so far. Don't spoil the record. You've measured up man-size in most things, but you wouldn't be worth a damn in a fight."

She stared. "Fight?"

"There will be a fight if Henry Manners doesn't come across with some straight answers," I said grimly. "If he won't give me a confession, I'll drag him out of there and toss him to David Lortig and his goons." I climbed out of the car and stuck my head back through the window. "You wait fifteen minutes. If I'm not back, take off—I won't be coming back."

In the glow of a street light, Jo's

face gleamed white. Her lips remained firm.

"Shall I call the police?" Her voice shook a little.

"Use your own judgment." I heard her call a soft good luck as I walked away.

At the drive entrance I stopped. The home stood some distance back, with a broad stretch of well trimmed lawn between. A row of lighted windows stretched across the ground floor; someone was home.

I knew this was my last shot. I had been lucky so far, but I couldn't hope to dodge the police much longer, not with a dragnet out. In a little over an hour, David Lortig and his goons would take up the chase. It didn't seem to matter much which set of dogs caught the bunny. A quick shot in the head, or a walk to the gas chamber up at San Quentin—it would be just as final either way.

A flagstone walk led from the drive over to the front door. I took a deep breath, grabbed the knocker and brought it down, hard. Nothing happened for some time; then a coach lamp went on beside the front door.

A moment later the door swung open. A short-legged, squat man stood silhouetted against the dim light.

"Yiss please," he said.

"I want to speak to Henry Manners."

"Very sorry—" The remainder of the reply came as the door began to swing shut again.

I didn't argue. As if a quarterback had slammed a football into my belly, I put my head down and charged. The door burst open. I bowled the man aside and ended up in the entry hall. I whirled to defend myself.

The servant had recovered and was closing the door. He turned—an Oriental with shaved head and full, pursed lips. He regarded me with an expression of impassive reproach. "Yiss please. I can help you?"

"You can help me by trotting Henry Manners out. And don't tell me he isn't here," I warned.

The Oriental moved across the room on his short legs in a gliding, half run. He stopped before the opposite door. "Very sorry," he said softly. "Master Manners not at home—presently."

"Scott." I recognized Henry Manners' voice beyond the door. "Scott, is that you?"

"It's me, all right," I called back. "Come out here. I want to talk to you."

The servant seemed not to have heard the voice. His expression remained unchanged, and he kept his position before the door. I leaped forward to grab his wrist and pull him aside. Instead of flesh and bone, I grabbed empty air.

I felt my own wrist being grasped. The servant shifted his weight suddenly and pulled down. I knew I

was in the air. The room spun around vertically—first the ceiling went by, then the walls, then the floor. My back crashed into the wall and I dropped to the floor in a crumpled heap.

My breath had been driven from my lungs in a single, violent gush of air. My spine felt shattered.

I fought the fiery pain in my chest in my attempt to get enough air for a groan. I willed my muscles to move enough for me to roll over.

The Oriental crouched over me, his squat legs spread apart. He held his arm upraised, and at the end of the arm—like a butcher's cleaver—his hand extended in a rigid plane.

I lay helpless under the arm. Then from the corner of my eye I saw the door open a crack. Henry Manner's face appeared in the opening. He stared at the Oriental's upraised arm, and a look of horror became frozen on his face.

"No, Chun," Manners cried. "No!"

Chun turned his head, his arm still held high. When he swung back, the yellow fire had died in the almond eyes.

I tore my eyes away to look over. The door was closed.

I had taken some jujitsu, or judo at school. But I had run into more than I had ever learned right here. This was professional. Chun was an expert, a black belt at least. I struggled to rise and fell back.

The picture of Chun standing over me was vivid in my mind. Then that picture was replaced by another—the picture of a blond, lying on a bed with her head cocked to one side. Realization exploded in my brain. I knew that was how I would have looked here on the floor of the entry hall, if Chun had brought the edge of his palm down in a karate chop.

I made another attempt, caught the edge of the table and pulled myself to my feet. Chun made no move to assist, or to harm me. I picked up my hat and straightened my coat.

I was whipped, I wasn't stupid enough to ask for a second helping. The next time Chun would go through with the chop.

"You win," I said through tight lips. "I'll take your word for it. Henry Manners is not home—presently. That was a hoot owl I heard."

Chun bowed, walked over and opened the front door.

The sight of the black emptiness beyond hit me hard. There was nothing out there, no other place to go. I had shot my bolt and it had turned out to be a paperwad, no more. I knew now who had murdered Kit Bentley, but I was powerless to do anything about it. Anger, fanned by the fire of indignation welled up in me.

"You have a clean, neat way to commit a murder, my friend," I said tightly. "No blood, no outcry."

I stepped out on the stoop and

turned. "You can tell that hoot owl that I know all about the IOU's he had Kit Bentley steal from David Lortig." The fire built up in me; it didn't matter what I said. "When I tell the police about the IOU's, and have them check the cause of death as a karate chop, they'll start to put two and two together."

The front door closed quietly. The coach lamp went out.

As I trudged back down the flagstones, I knew I had hurled an empty threat. Henry Manners would probably laugh himself silly when Chun passed on my words. If Manners didn't panic, he should realize he was in no danger. My story would never hold up. David Lortig would deny there had ever been any IOU's, or that he even knew Henry Manners.

Jo's face was a blob pressed against the windshield. "Thank God you're safe," she said when I opened the door. "It had been over fifteen minutes, but I stayed. I was hoping—"

I sank into the seat and let my head drop. "Hoping what?"

She regained her composure. "Hoping that everything turned out all right," she said primly.

"It didn't. Manners was in there, but I didn't see him."

I told her what had happened.

"Did he hurt you badly?"

I nodded. "He hurt me where it hurts most—my ego, my hopes and my chances to survive."

"You had it coming to you, the way you barged in there," she said, her tone peevish with relief. "You took the law into your own hands, like a barbarian. I should never have allowed you to talk me into this silly, wild goose chase in the first place. I should have insisted that we handle your case in the proper, legal manner. We should have gone to the police at once, as I said."

Her tirade didn't make me sore. Jo had been under great pressure waiting out here and this was the safety valve popping off.

I had a grab-bag of questions in my head, with no answers to match. Manners had left a message he wanted to see me, yet he had refused to come out. Why had he pretended not to be home, yet called out to me? Why had he stopped Chun from going through with the karate chop? If Manners had ordered the servant to commit one murder, why the look of horror on his face at the prospect of a second?

Henry Manners didn't like me that much—in fact I had evidence Manners didn't like me at all. Evidence, the doped drink in the apartment and the frame-up for murder.

"You have managed to get yourself beaten up twice this evening," Jo said. "Why do you think civilized countries have police, courts of law?"

I tuned her out again. Maybe I had tackled this whole thing from the wrong angle. It had looked simple at first. The picture had been

clear to me, so clear I had set out on the trail, my nose to the ground and I hadn't looked up. Maybe I should have.

"—you've run around from one spot to another, without knowing what you were looking for. It's a wonder you haven't dragged me to that beatnik spot at the beach."

I grabbed Jo's wrist.

"Shut up," I said. "I want to think." Her words had jolted my memory, brought back the thought of a thread I had left dangling, something that should be woven into the pattern. Back at the apartment, we had thought the subversive element might be connected with this case. Somewhere along the line I had forgotten the hairy pig completely.

I checked my watch. Thirty minutes to final deadline. I still had a chance to make one last effort before the guns went *bang*.

"Hang on," I said. "We're going to the Lifeline."

Jo didn't protest. She sat stiff and disapproving, but she was the one who spotted the car behind us.

"I think we are being followed," she said.

"Lortig's goons again?"

"It's not the same car. This one is a sports car. It seems to be a silver gray coupe."

Henry Manners owned a silver gray Jaguar coupe. "After I cross this next intersection, I'll slow down. That will give us a chance to have a look at them under the street light. Tell me when they enter the intersection."

Moments later, Jo gave the signal and I braked. At the same instant, I snapped my head around to have a look. The other car slowed, long enough for me to make certain it was Henry Manners' car.

"I think there are two men," Jo said.

Evidently my threat to Chun had hit a target. The fact they hadn't jumped us made me believe that Manners wasn't desperate yet. He was worried, though—worried enough to keep an eye on me.

Chun was a different bowl of chop suey. Chun had already murdered one girl. Suddenly I didn't want Jo to look the way Kit Bentley had looked when the Oriental had finished with his hand-hatchet job. I decided to deal Jo out of this game; drop her off where she could catch a taxi and go home to her law books.

With this settled, I began to think about myself. With the police looking for me, Lortig's men on the prowl and Chun dogging me, my enemies were closing in on all sides. I had only one place to run! Straight ahead.

As I drove, a plan came to me. Not much of a plan, more of a vague idea, but right now I was grabbing at straws. There was no time to work out the details, for when the lights of a shopping center appeared, I slowed down and pulled in.

Jo was watching through the rear window. "The sports car parked down the street."

I nodded. "You come with me."

We got out and I led her into a drug store. I picked my way around the lawn mowers and stacks of motor oil to the phone booths. I found the number of the Penguin Colony and dialed. It took some time before I heard David Lortig's soft voice on the other end of the line.

Jo looked tense as I steered her back through the obstacle course to the outside. We stopped at the curb.

"I called David Lortig," I said. "I told him I had the IOU's, and that I would deliver them to him at the Lifeline."

I felt a shudder in her arm. "Was that smart?"

"It wouldn't be the first stupid thing I've pulled today." I looked down into her upturned face. "This is the end of the line for you, counselor. From now on things are going to get rough, and you don't belong in a dog fight. Stick to court battles. Now you grab yourself a cab."

I pulled out my wallet, fingered through the remaining bills and pulled out a couple. I looked up to see Jo climbing into the Volkswagen.

I slid in through the other door.

"Don't be a damned fool," I growled.

"Look who's calling me a fool," Jo said. She looked close to tears. "This was my first case. I can't drop my first case before I've even had a chance to file for a writ of habeas corpus, or anything."

She pulled away when I leaned forward. "And don't get the idea I'm staying because of you. I made up my mind a long time ago never to become involved with a client—even if he had red hair, freckles and turned out to be a complete idiot."

I shrugged. What else could I do? I'd only be in more trouble if I tried to drag a struggling woman out of her own car in a busy parking lot.

I pulled out on the street and drove on. "Is Manners' car still behind us?" Jo nodded. "Good. I want them to stick with us to the Lifeline."

We came to the Santa Monica freeway, and I climbed the ramp to head south. I eased the bug along the entrance lane, watched my chance and swung over, to take a slot in the roaring speedway of cars. I had seen the Jag enter the ramp, so I knew Manners and Chun were behind us.

I kept in the right lane, with the speedometer hung on sixty-five. On our left, larger cars shot by us. I settled back and relaxed, but straightened up again fast when the streamlined snout of the Jag swept up fast in the next lane. The sports car held poised for a moment beside us, then made a dive at our front end.

I tromped down on the brake. The bug stood on its nose and I

waited for the splintering crash of metal from behind. None came. The lane had been clear.

The silver gray Jag rode the guard rail on tortured rubber, then settled flush and sped on. In the second of passing, I had seen Henry Manners' white face pressed against the window on the passenger's side.

I let out my breath, stepped down on the gas and reached over to pat Jo's knee. "They tried to ditch us. We were lucky. If this had been a bigger car, they would have had to cut us out with a torch."

I wanted Chun and Manners to know where I left the freeway. That meant I must be ahead of them before we reached my turn-off. I moved into a high speed lane, and managed to get the bug boxed in between two other cars. The three of us sailed by the Jag, where Chun impassively gripped the wheel.

Neither he nor Manners glanced over.

A short time later our off-ramp sign appeared ahead, then flashed by over us. I waited until the last second, then swung over and plunged down the ramp to the street below.

Jo reported that the Jag had made the manuever successfully behind us. I took off toward the beach. We couldn't outrun the Jag, but I intended to outdodge it, if necessary.

It wasn't necessary. They dropped behind. By the time we reached the Lifeline, the car was nowhere in sight. The place was a low building—more of a shack than a building. A peeling sign had an arrow pointing to a dirt parking lot beside the place. I bounced in and stopped.

"I'd leave you out here, but it might be even more dangerous."

"Don't play the over-protective male," Jo said and opened her shoulder bag. "Let me touch up my makeup. I must look a mess after what you've dragged me through."

She dabbed at her face, got out

and smoothed down the front of her skirt.

"I'm ready," she announced.

The girl amazed me. A few minutes ago she had looked ready to cave in. I gave her a tight grin of assurance and handed over a few coins.

"I remember a public telephone inside the door," I told her. "Call the police. Tell them you want to surrender your client. Tell them to get here fast. Try to have them send a riot squad if possible."

THE LOW ceiling room looked about as I remembered it. The same, stale air remained from my last visit, heavy as ever with the smell of smoke and hot candle wax. I pointed out the telephone and walked down to a table in the center of the floor.

Half-filled booths lined both side walls. A row of tables stood in the center, each with a wine bottle, topped with a burning candle stuck in the neck. A scattering of characters slumped in the booths, or slouched at the tables. None of them moved, but stared, zombi-eyed at another character on the small stage at the end. The performer-character strummed a guitar and sang a psuedo folk song about the atom bomb.

I had looked back to check on Jo, and had half turned back again when the front door opened.

I held my breath. Henry Manners and Chun entered. They did not pause, but crossed the back of the room and came down the opposite side, to take a booth across from my table. Neither man looked my way.

The first of my enemies had arrived.

Jo approached the table, straight and unsmiling. I held a chair out and she sat down. She looked around at the modern art scrawled on the walls. I saw her nose wrinkle when she looked at the characters, as though she could smell their unwashed bodies.

"I told you they were creeps," I said, leaning across the table. "Did you get the cops?"

She gave a slight nod. "Which one of them is the Hairy Pig?"

"He isn't here. I think that door next to the stage leads to a kitchen. He may be in there. I hope so."

The character on the stage finished his song and received a token smattering of applause for his effort. He shuffled off.

I checked my watch and saw it was two minutes past midnight. Lortig's deadline had come and gone. This would be a good spot for an execution, but a hell of a place to die. I wet my lips and tried to grin at Jo.

Three characters ambled out on the stage, two girls and a fellow with a stringy beard. He tooted a recorder. A moon-faced girl stood in the center, and a scarecrow of a dame sat in a chair on the other side. She hoisted a zither into her

lap. She twanged the strings and I jumped.

The short hairs on the nape of my neck stood on end, either from nerves, or a blast of night wind.

"Did somebody come in?" I asked softly.

"Yes," Jo said without moving her lips. "Two men. One of them short and fat, the other one tall. They're wearing topcoats over tuxedos."

"Does one of them have blue jowls?"

"Yes."

I watched her eyes. They moved slowly, then stopped at a point opposite our table. I knew Lortig and his henchman had taken a booth across from Manners and Chun. My second set of enemies had arrived.

The trio on the stage began their act. The man tooted the recorder. The scarecrow hit the zither strings. The moon-faced girl began to recite.

She said in a toneless voice,

"Dooms moon hangs new,
Tombstones yearn
Sorrow is you."

I stole a glance at the booth. Both Lortig and blue-jowl had their eyes fixed on our table. I looked down at my watch and tried to estimate the time lapse since Jo had called the cops.

"Gods sing in glee
Angels scream.
Graves ayawn,
Nightmare, not a dream."

I looked at the empty, kitchen doorway and willed that the Hairy Pig would appear. The doorway stayed empty. Sixty seconds more I gave myself before I called the signals. I reached under the table and clutched Jo's hand. She returned my squeeze, but did not smile.

The recorder, the voice and zither strings became an unreal jangle of sound as tension built up inside of me. My palms sweat inside clenched fists. I counted aloud, yet under my breath. "Five-four-three-two-one-zero."

I jumped up.

"Come out, you commie bastard," I yelled. "Come out of there, you Hairy Pig."

A quick uprun of zither strings, then the room was plunged into dead silence.

The Hairy Pig appeared in the doorway, like a prehistoric monster emerging from his den. He wore the same T shirt, with the coffee stain across the front. He glared around the room through slit eyes formed by blobs of flesh.

Jo jumped to her feet and I swept her behind me. I grabbed the wine bottle and felt the soft wax squish between my fingers as I brought it down across the table edge in a splintering crash. I held the jagged weapon ready as I saw Lortig and blue jowl slide out of the booth.

I swung around as Chun erupted from the other side. The Oriental came forward fast, in a short-

legged crouch, his arm slightly raised. I hurled a chair at him, but he brushed this aside and came on. He poised for the leap and killing blow.

A small automatic appeared in Lortig's pudgy hand. The gun spoke with a polite zap, and Chun sprawled at my feet in an unjudo-like heap.

Lortig had saved my life only to protect his property. The club owner thought I had the IOU's. I had no time to worry about Lortig. A bellow made me whirl. The Hairy Pig bore down, his huge arms outspread to grab me in a grizzly bear hug. I tried to upend the table, but he wrenched it from my hands.

The creeps moved in from all sides, but I saw only the black beard, and the broad expanse of belly——the dirty, white mass that took the form of a row of opposing linemen. I dropped into a stance, then charged in, head down. I heard a satisfying grunt, followed by the whistle of wind through the beard as my head sank into blubber up to my ears. The top of my head hurt.

I staggered back and tried to recover for another charge. But stars exploded in my brain, as I was borne off by celestial bodies, to the crash of a burst of angelic harp music.

I next drifted back to earth through a maze of noise and the sound of Jo's soft voice. I opened my eyes and saw uniformed legs milling around me.

My third set of enemies had arrived. My timing had been perfect. The cops had come in time.

My head ached with a hurt, pinched in feeling. I reached up to find a mass of tangled wires and splintered wood around my ears. Jo helped me pull the wreckage off.

"That witch hit you over the head with her zither," Jo said.

I shifted my eyes to where the scarecrow girl lay sprawled across a chair, her eyes rolled up.

"Sorrow is a cockroach," the girl moaned.

"I hit her with a wine bottle," Jo said.

"You're a real sweetheart." I was content to lie in Jo's arms, and feel the firmness of her breast against my cheek.

Henry Manners' voice persisted over the other noise.

"I didn't kill Kit Bentley," he screamed. "Chun killed her—Chun and the other commies. They wanted to get their hands on my IOU's."

"Tell him to shut up," I murmured. "I've figured all that out."

But Jo wasn't content to let me stay; she pulled me to my feet. Chun still lay sprawled in the same spot. The Hairy Pig sat in a chair, his head down, being sick on the floor. The police had David Lortig and blue jowl in custody. The club owner looked at the scene around him with a slightly bewildered gaze.

Henry Manners pulled away from his guard and rushed over to grab my arm.

"I didn't mean for you to get into trouble," he cried. "I brought you to the apartment for my own protection. Chun was in the kitchen all the time. He put that stuff in your drink. He killed Kit and grabbed the IOU's. I tried to find you and explain. I wanted to—"

I pulled his hand away. "Sell me back my introduction to you and we'll call it square." I turned away before I got as sick as the Hairy Pig looked.

The cops hauled Manners away, still babbling. He spilled his guts to everyone. It was the old story—Manners had played footsie with the commies for kicks, then found out too late they played for keeps.

The big prize was to be the government secret plans at the Manners' Engineering plant.

They had forced Henry to place Chun in the Manners' household as a servant, and intended to use the IOU's as a club against the Manners boys, both junior and senior.

The cops were taking the prisoners out now. It took three of them to hoist the Hairy Pig up and lug him to the door. I waited; then there was only Jo and me standing in the wreckage of the Lifeline. "How about me?"

Jo drew herself up and thrust out her chin.

"I showed the lieutenant my credentials," she said in a very lawyer-like tone. "He has placed you in my custody."

I drew myself up and glared down at her. "I'll go to jail first." I looked into the gray eyes, past the film of flint, down to where there was a glow I hadn't had time to notice before. I thought I recognized the light and swept Jo into my arms. She held stiff for a short moment, then melted her body against mine.

"You'll like being a dame, once you let yourself go."

"I'll try, Scott."

"I'll teach you," I said.

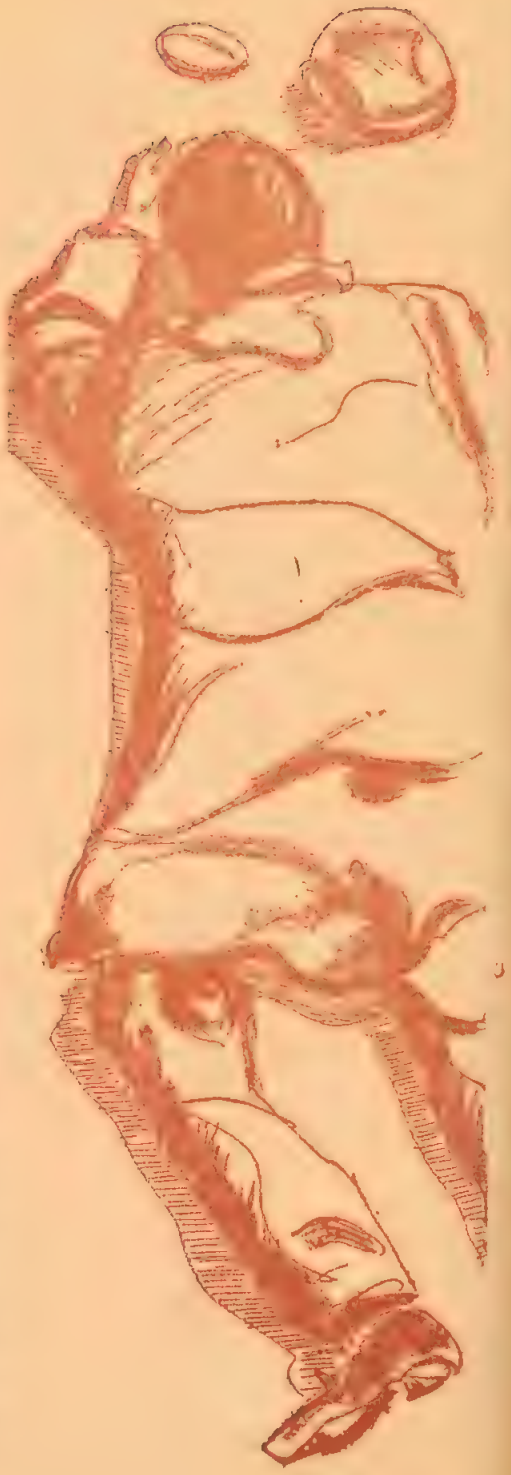
And damned if I didn't like the idea.

A NEW COMPLETE SOLO AND ILLYA NOVEL NEXT MONTH

The Mars Jar

Fettered, waiting, the Thing from outer space bided its time. Then, one incredible day . . .

by A. M. LIGHTNER



THE JAR stood on a back shelf in the laboratory, where for some reason it had missed being cleaned out when the experiment was abandoned. For the past two weeks, whenever Andrew Elliott needed anything from that corner of the lab, he had made a practice of walking past and looking up at the jar. Something, it seemed to him, might be growing there.

The Mars experiment was not his baby. It was the work of the eminent Dr. L. L. Booth, who left the base soon after Andrew came to work there.

He remembered the project being talked about at the time. A number of airtight jars had been arranged with red sandstone or lava soil in the bottoms. Each jar received its complement of seeds, spores or soil bacteria, and then the air had been pumped out until only a very thin atmosphere remained, such as is found several miles above Mt. Everest, or, theoretically, on the surface of the planet Mars.

The temperature had been reduced to that of the red planet, and only the amount of sunlight allowed that daily reaches our distant neighbor. When everything possible had been done to duplicate the environment of Mars, the jars had been watched to see if any life form could endure and develop in these rugged conditions.

The idea had immediately aroused the young scientist's interest, but unfortunately by the time he joined the Army's space research group, the experiment had been written off as "results negative." Andrew found himself working under one of the naturalized German scientists, transferred to fill Dr. Booth's place.

Dr. Karl von Plank was a difficult man to work with. Not only was his English often difficult to follow, but he insisted on prompt and exact fulfilment of his orders, and he was not interested in anyone else's ideas. He had ordered the Mars jars cleaned out shortly after he took charge of the group, and it was only because this one was hidden behind some other paraphernalia that it had not suffered a like fate.

Perhaps it was because Dr. von Plank, a German of the old order, was so meticulous and pedantic that young Dr. Elliott found it necessary to enliven his days by occasionally peering at Dr. Booth's imaginative experiment. Dr. von Plank had dismissed the whole thing in his usual positive manner when it was first brought to his attention.

"We are not here to indulge in fairy-tale dreams," he said. "We are here to develop diets for astronauts. They must take everything with them. Everyone knows that nothing grows on Mars."

The first time Andrew had ventured to disagree.

"How can you know, when it's thirty-five million miles away? How can we be sure unless we try?"

Von Plank had wheeled upon him.

"You know nothing!" he cried. "Any imbecile knows there is nothing on Mars!"

"Then why are we trying to go there?" put in one of the lab assistants.

Von Plank lost no time in demolishing him.

"Idiot! To beat the Russians! And we won't do it if we all gibble-gabble here. Back to work everyone, and clean out that mess. The

results were negative, as I could have told Dr. Booth. I have read his report"

Von Plank ruled the laboratory with an iron hand. He would have reduced the time for lunch if it had not been defined in regulations. He followed carefully each assistant's work, peering over his shoulder and into his microscope, and no deviations for original research were allowed.

At first Andrew felt sorry for the German professor, who was obviously out of his environment among the easy going and friendly Americans. And it was apparent that he suffered from adenoids, or possibly sinus trouble, for he had a habit of snorting and breathing heavily with his mouth open as he examined the work of his underlings. The more he concentrated, the more his mouth dilated. But when he stood up to deliver his opinion—usually in the negative—it would clamp shut and his lips would be pressed into tight, uncompromising lines.

"What kind of a mess is this?" he would shout. "Keep your bench in better order!" Or, "Why have you not achieved a synthesis? You are proceeding very much too slowly!"

Andrew found that he soon forgot any sympathy for von Plank's ailments, if such they were. Probably psychosomatic, he told himself, when he heard the German breathing heavily down his neck and he steeled himself for the next biting criticism.

And so the occasional trip to the back of the lab and the quick look at the Mars jar became a kind of escape. When he thought he could detect something growing in the jar, he put it down at first to imagination. He wanted Dr. Booth's work to be recognized. He wanted von Plank to be confounded. It was funny what your imagination could do under the circumstances. Resolutely, he applied himself to the work in hand, determined to keep away from the corner with the jar, to forget all about it.

Nevertheless, when he went home that night and eight-year-old Howie climbed up in his lap, demanding to know what was new at the space project, Andrew found himself telling him about the jar. It made a good story. And when, after describing the work he ended with his observation that something *might* be growing there, the boy was wild with excitement.

"But Pop, they'll have to start the experiment again! Won't they?"

"No. Dr. Booth isn't here any more and Dr. von Plank isn't interested."

"Oh, but they've got to! Can't you see, they've got to!" The child's mind jumped over all the doubts. "Pop, if they won't do it, couldn't you bring it home and let me watch it?"

"I'm afraid not, Howie. It's gov-

ernment property, you see. One of these days they'll clean it out like all the other jars."

"But they mustn't! They mustn't! I'd watch it so carefully! I would!"

Andrew realized that he had started one of those childish enthusiasms that could get out of hand.

"Look, son. I was just telling you a story. I don't think there's anything growing there at all. It only seemed like it, and I haven't had time to look carefully."

And you won't take time, either, he told himself. Can't let yourself get into a silly dither like the kid! Totally unscientific. And for the next week he applied himself doggedly to his scheduled work and didn't go near the back shelf. Every afternoon when he came home, Howie ran to meet him, demanding whether the mysterious plant in the jar had grown, and every time Andrew told him to stop being silly and forget about it.

And then one day he had to go into the back corner to look for a piece of apparatus, and almost against his will his eyes raised themselves to the top shelf and he looked at the jar. For a full minute he stood transfixed. There was no doubt about it this time. Something was growing in the jar. A flat, reddish brown lichen-like substance had covered the sand at the bottom, and several slender spikes were protruding upward from it.

Andrew stared, while his mind raced over all the possible explanations. The most obvious was that the jar was no longer airtight. Some foreign matter, some germ or spore or seed outside the experiment, had gotten in and was developing. He reached up and took down the jar, but after a close inspection, he admitted that it was airtight.

He must go back and reread Dr. Booth's notes. Which of the various seeds or spores had been in this jar? Which might now be growing, and were they developing in the usual manner, or was this something different? Something twisted by the alien environment?

His first reaction was to show this proof to Dr. von Plank, but he rejected the idea as soon as he thought of it. The *Herr Doktor* would be sure to follow his first negative impulse and throw the whole thing out, thus ruining any hope of a successful experiment. With his next thought, he remembered Howie's tearful insistence: "I'd watch it so carefully, I would!" Of course! He'd take it home to his own lab in his garage, and Howie could help him keep an eye on it. Who would miss an old jar that had been consigned to oblivion?

For the rest of the day, Andrew wrestled with the ethics of the situation, but by the time he went home, his mind was made up. The decision was somewhat simplified by the fact that his wife had gone to visit her sister and would not be there to exercise restraint. He ate

with Howie in the base cafeteria and while he was putting the boy to bed, he explained about the jar. Howie was beside himself with excitement, and Andrew made a gesture toward child education by ordering him to have a place prepared for the jar on their lab bench by the time he got home the next day.

Andrew lived in one of the civilian houses nearest to the lab, and it was only a short walk to work. Next morning he took a large brown paper bag folded up in his briefcase, and it was a simple matter at the end of the day to slip the jar in the bag and walk out with it. Nobody asked any questions.

The Mars jar now sat in the place of honor in Andrew Elliott's little lab, and every morning and evening he and Howie rushed to see what changes had taken place in its contents. Andrew studied Dr. Booth's report and made an effort to set up the original temperature and light requirements.

They were not disappointed. Every day the growth within the jar increased. In a day or two, little round knobs appeared at the ends of the stalks.

"Just like antennae on insects!" cried Howie. "Maybe we've got a Martian, Pop! Maybe that's how they communicate!"

"Nonsense!" said his father. "It's only some kind of vegetation. Wish I knew what had been planted in this jar." But all identifying marks had been removed in preparation for the cleaning, which it had somehow missed.

Andrew had promised himself that the Mars jar would be a secret between himself and his son, but he found it impossible to keep quiet about these exciting developments. Within a few days he had brought his best friends to see it, and soon it was the talk of the lab.

Dr. von Plank was the last one to hear of it, but hear it he did in a matter of days. He bore down upon Andrew, where he was concentrating on some figures, and the German's mouth was set in a tight, narrow line.

"What is this I hear about you, Dr. Elliott?" he snapped. "Absconding with government property! Setting up your own laboratory with equipment from the Army!"

"It's just one jar," Andrew protested. "Be glad to pay for it. Interests my boy, you know."

"I understand it interests more people than one boy. I understand it has an experiment in it, Herr Doktor Elliott. One of our experiments—filched from this project."

Andrew felt his blood pressure rising and tried to speak calmly.

"The experiment was finished, doctor. You remember, the Mars jar. You ordered it cleaned out. This one was left over, of no interest to anyone but the boy."

"Not convincing!" cried the German, his voice beginning to rise. "You are trying to make a monkey

out of me, Herr Doktor! I see that! Now, you will bring back that jar and empty it before me. No, we will go together to your house and get it!"

"Now?" Andrew was aware of a sudden silence in the lab. All the scientists and assistants were listening. A kind of white-coated wall seemed to hem him in on every side, and von Plank and he were pitted against each other in the center. "But I'm right in the middle of some work now! I know—"

"You know nothing!" screamed von Plank. "Your work is of no importance. You will come with me now. That's an order!"

Andrew put down his notes and stood up. He felt the white-coated figures draw back to let him follow his chief from the room. His mind was running over a hundred possibilities and actions. In the lobby of the building he excused himself and ducked into the telephone booth.

Hoping that Howie might be home from school, he dialed his number and was relieved when the boy answered.

"Listen, son. I'm coming home now and Dr. von Plank is with me. Go down to the lab right away and hide the Mars jar. Hurry. And see if you can put something that looks like it in its place."

He came out of the booth, hoping his face did not show deceit, trying to concoct an excuse for his superior. But the German was already out the door and down the walk. He had to run to catch up.

It was unfortunate that he lived so near the lab. Von Plank unerringly made for the garage door.

"Your lab is in here, I take it. Now if you'll open up for me, Herr Doktor."

Reluctantly, Andrew pulled open the door and followed the scientist inside. Howie stood at the table, the jar in his arms. He had not had time to make the substitution. As soon as he saw them, he began to cry.

"Don't let him take it, Pop! Don't let him open it up! He'll let them out. He'll let the Martians out and they'll all die!"

"So!" said von Plank. "A young scientist in the making, and he believes in Martians. This is government property, young man. It must go back to the project. Give it to me, please."

Even adults found it difficult to argue when the German spoke with the voice of authority. Howie handed over the jar, but his face seemed to crumple into the lines of childish frustration.

"Please don't let him out!" he cried. "I saw him, I really did. He waved at me. If you let him out, he'll die in our atmosphere. You'll kill him! You'll kill him!"

And then he choked and the tears came and he ran from the room.

"Well, well, you really have created an interest," said von

Plank. "An interest in fairy tales. And now let's see what we have here." And he took the jar to the bench and sat down to examine it.

Suddenly, Andrew felt very tired of the whole business. Probably it was nothing more than an accidental anomaly over which he was risking his job and his career. It wasn't even his own experiment. And Howie was all worked up to an emotional crisis. This was no way to introduce the boy to science. With an exclamation of impatience, he turned and ran after his son, leaving von Plank alone in the lab.

He found the boy in his room and it took a good half hour to quiet him down, to get him to listen to reasonable arguments. But at last they were both able to go back downstairs with a certain appearance of calm. As they approached the garage, it struck Andrew that there was unexpected quiet in his lab. Had his superior simply taken the jar back to the project, leaving him to deal with the child? Perhaps the sensible thing to do.

They went into the garage and Andrew stopped in shocked silence at the scene before him. The jar lay overturned and open where his chief had dropped it, and paraphernalia from the work bench was scattered on the floor. Von Plank himself was sprawled across the table. Even before he went to investigate, there was no doubt in Andrew's mind. The wild contortion of the limbs, the discolored face told him that the scientist was dead. As he stood immobilized by surprise and horror, Howie pushed past him, shrilly crying his appraisal of the situation.

"It killed him, Pop! Look there! He let the Martian out and it killed him!"

Late that night, Andrew was still living in a state of shock and disbelief as he waited in the office of Army Intelligence for the autopsy report. Events, he felt, were closing in on him. The officer had refused to let him go home to take care of Howie, who was now sleeping at a neighbor's. Patiently and politely, for he was a civilian scientist, to be treated with respect, they had gone over the events of the day.

Over and over. His relations with the German had not been the most amicable, had they? It was true that he took a piece of equipment from the lab? Everyone on the project had given a vivid description of the argument that ensued. And afterwards, in his garage; how could he explain the angry shouts reported by the neighbors. Some even said the child was crying, "You'll kill him!"

Murder! They hadn't charged him with it yet, but it was obvious what they thought. How had he come to this appalling situation? From the innocent observation of a discarded jar? Perhaps he should never have taken it home, but many men spirited more valuable things from the lab than a disused jar. Now his job was in jeopardy—his career, perhaps even his life!

Andrew tried vainly to sort it all out. Von Plank was hard to get along with. Anyone would testify to that. But murder! Could he be losing his mind? Some kind of blackout? He saw again the wild disorder in his garage. What could have happened to the man? His imagination raced with fantasies of science fiction: an extraterrestrial menace, a lethal Martian miasma that escaped from the jar to overwhelm the professor. With an effort at sanity, he raised his head and looked at the colonel.

"Why can't you believe my son? I know he's only a child, but he won't lie to you. We both left the man in perfect health. I was upstairs with Howard for half an hour."

"Yes, I know. We've talked to the boy. You'll excuse me if I say he seems a bit—um, fanciful. He insists a Martian did it."

"I've told you that's because of the experiment. Dr. Booth's experiment. This was an old jar. It interested both me and the boy."

The colonel sighed.

"Yes, I know," he said again. "But I'm afraid you'll have to come up with a better explanation than that." He wished the doctor would hurry with the autopsy. What wouldn't these scientists dream up next!

At last the door opened and the young medical officer entered and laid his report before the colonel. That officer stared at it.

"Does this make sense, Doc?"

"I doubt it. But that's what it was. He was asphyxiated by a seed in his windpipe."

Andrew was on his feet. "A seed!"

The officers looked at him in surprise.

"Seem reasonable to you?" the colonel demanded.

With a flash of insight, Andrew saw what must have happened. Those little bulbs on the ends of the stalks, they were seed pods! He saw von Plank bending over, intent upon the jar, his wheezing mouth open, as it did when he was concentrating. He saw him break the

seal and lift the lid and the resulting implosion of the near vacuum give wings to the seed, which with the plant's last effort at self propagation flew out of the Mars jar and down von Plank's throat, causing him to drop the jar and almost demolish the lab as he struggled frantically for breath.

As simply as possible, Andrew explained his theory to the two men. They looked at each other and shook their heads.

"It's the only thing that fits, that's certain," said the medical officer.

"The kid was right after all," the colonel admitted. "The jar killed him. What a freak accident!" He was relieved that he would not be involved in a murder investigation after all. "You'd better go home to your boy, Dr. Elliott. He needs you. Just be around when we want you for the inquest."

Andrew mumbled his thanks and rose to go, hardly believing that the nightmare was over. At the door he paused and turned uncertainly.

"Just one thing, doctor. Could I—could you, when you're done with it, let me have the seed?"

"The seed? You want the damned seed?"

"Yes. You see, it's very important to me to find out what it is."

"Oh. Well, all right, professor. We'll save it for you."

They watched him make his way out the door, and then the colonel brought his fist down on the desk.

"Isn't that just like a scientist? Inhuman."

NEXT MONTH

NIGHTMARE FOR A NIGHT

A Dramatic Spy Story Novelet

by ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

Back there behind the Berlin Wall a dead man was waiting for me. And at my side, driving me forward, was a man who wanted only one thing—Murder.

David McCallum (Illya)

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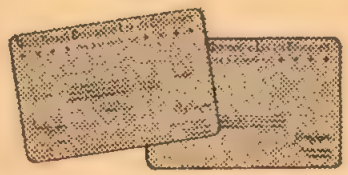

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Down there in the stretch high-priced nags were giving their all. Upstairs, in the clubhouse, improvers of the breed were figuring out new ways to go broke. Me, I was peacefully picking pockets and minding my own business—until two deadly characters nudged me with a gun and promised me a—

Pocketful of Holes

by ROBERT W. ALEXANDER

I DIDN'T COME to California to kill anyone. And I certainly didn't come to California to get myself murdered. I travel around the country peacefully and mind my own business.

I visited Santa Anita race track merely hoping for diversion. I don't particularly care for horse racing. I'm a lousy handicapper.

Two amateurs—really they were—chose me for a victim. I found it hilarious. I was walking up the stairs in the clubhouse.

The two men used the stall and bump routine. The man in front of me pretended to drop something, and when I abruptly stopped behind him, his accomplice in back of me casually brushed against me as though he couldn't avoid it.

I shouldn't say their hit was completely unprofessional—a layman would never have known. And, they did get my wallet. I wouldn't miss the money in the wallet they took.

As a matter of fact, I didn't know

how much money was in the wallet. I had only moments before removed it from a pompous gentleman's pocket, so that I could wager on the sixth race.

Gambling, to me, is a waste of time. The wallet I lost to the amateurs was the fifth I had taken that afternoon. Every race I bet I had picked a loser, and I'm a plunger. I always bet the contents of the purse in my hands. Not having the cash to back my choice for the sixth race was no great loss.

But seeing the smug look on the two pickpockets' faces was another thing. I couldn't stand it. To retrieve the wallet was too much of a temptation to resist. I put on my hat and coat to change appearance.

I'm an American thief, which may seem a regrettable stigma for it doesn't credit the true artistry I've mastered. That I haven't gained fame as a pickpocket is proof of my skill. I've never been caught. I circulate with top society, purchase first class fares, acquire box seats to everything and enjoy the finest available where ever I go. I can afford it.

Of course, I've become so accomplished at my profession that even money has now become a bore. Money is everywhere. I don't have any savings, or bank account, for that matter. My assets are carried by the people around me. There are fat wallets, purses, and jewelry, ever ready at my pleasure to be purloined. It's the same as having the real dough in my pocket.

I learned my trade when I was nine years old and have practiced it for twenty-four years.

I guessed the two men would follow pattern and split the proceeds in the men's room. I unobtrusively took a biased course, using a bit of mirror on my glasses and actually led them to the restroom. Then I waited for them.

When they entered the restroom, I made an exit by passing between them with my head down and in a hurry. I can work with either hand, or with both simultaneously. Neither man recognized me and neither man was aware that he had been touched.

It was beautiful. Not only did I extract my recently lost wallet, but I removed *both* of theirs. Never, have I been more tempted to remain and witness chagrin.

I did linger in the vicinity. At a bar. Before long, the track police were summoned to stop a pugilistic argument in the restroom.

In the best of spirits I sipped my drink and then I noticed this girl. Or, I should say, I noticed that this girl noticed me and that's a very unusual thing. I'm of such average feature and build I seldom acquire a second glance. It's a distinct advantage in my profession to have a nondescript appearance. I even dress the part.

I had noticed the girl before she looked at me. Who wouldn't? She was outstanding of face and figure.

Her hair was light enough brown to be called blond, and she had plenty of it. She wore a chic tan suit that clothed her nicely without disturbing a single curve of her jutting charms. She radiated attraction and there she was, looking at me with the perceptible start of a smile on her lovely mouth.

The next move was obviously mine. But just then some character strolled up to link his arm in hers. She gave me a *too bad, Charlie* look with a raised brow and transfered her attention to gruesome puss. I later learned, to my sorrow, his name was Hector Van Zandt. My sorrow was meeting him.

I picked a horse for the sixth and lost the contents of all three wallets. After watching the race I returned to the bar to ponder a choice for the seventh. I might mention I extracted a ten spot from a happy winner on the way to pay my bar tab. A simple enough task. Generally, I try to avoid taking from the little man who works manually for his money.

I finally made my choice for the seventh and looked up to find me a well-heeled victim. Just then I saw this girl again, far down the bar, give me another glance. Her companion, this Van Zandt character, was beside her and he was accepting change from the bartender. He was tucking a handful of bills into an already satiated billfold.

The humor of taking his wallet appealed to me. So, I walked over beside him and ordered another drink without knowing he was baiting me. Or, rather, *they* were baiting me.

Hector Van Zandt is a man who just misses being tall. He appears shorter than he actually is, because he has powerful shoulders, and arms, and he has narrow hips and the short athletic legs of a tumbler. I studied him. Separating him from his cash, I figured, could lower him a notch in the eyes of his girlfriend. I could later come to their rescue and gain an introduction. I was stupid!

The instant I touched his wallet, I withdrew my hand like I'd been burnt! I froze my face and looked the other way. I was on the opposite side of Hector that the girl was. I ordered another drink without looking at them to regain control of myself. Hector Van Zandt had *pinned* his wallet inside his coat pocket!

I was never more amused, or amazed, in my life. A pinned wallet is not a problem—any pro can cope with it. My surprise was at the way he had pinned it. He had slipped the wallet inside his coat in and out. Just like that! One motion.

Now, the dexterity of placing a wallet in a pocket and fastening it with a safety pin like that, takes professional know-how. I was immediately aware that Hector Van Zandt was no novice.

I figured he was a pickpocket of some stature. He was well dressed,

sported a huge diamond on his finger, and he was in company with a personable young lady of poise and station. I should have extended him professional courtesy and bypassed him. But I didn't. I was too attracted by the girl.

It's a bad thing to let females rule the emotions. To reach the pinnacles I've attained in the profession has taken solitary endeavor. I exclude girls when I'm working. I always have.

I chanced a casual glance at Hector. A prominent forehead above a large face. Black hair, sort of matted on top. Dull gray eyes that stare. The coldest face I'd ever seen.

I decided to take him with my best finesse. I unfastened the safety pin holding his wallet without a miss. Hector even later admitted he didn't feel a thing. But, he was aware I had made my other pass at him. Hector pulled a switch on me. I say it was easily done, and hardly fair, for I concentrated on *not* watching him, or her! I looked the other way.

A trap was set to catch me and it worked, to my painful surprise. The instant I pulled on his wallet, after unsnapping his safety pin, a trap closed on my fingers. It was a diabolical thing with teeth that crunched my fingers like a bear trap. My hand was held firm inside his pocket.

I was no sooner conscious of the pain when Hector slid out of his coat like a magician. He pulled it to the floor, forcing me and my trapped hand to stoop, and then he stood on his coat while I yelled.

I swung my free hand at his legs, but he kicked at my wrist and nearly broke it.

"Shut up! And stand up!" he ordered.

I didn't have a choice. He locked his coat around his arm and still held me captive. There I was, with my fingers practically being cut in two. People were forming a circle to look at us. For the first time I was caught like a common thief. The humiliation was the worst part.

The girl laughed as she came around Hector to grasp my free arm. I felt like slugging her with it.

"Smile!" she said, smiling at me. "Pretend it's a gag, or we'll turn you over to the police!"

I can assure you my smile showed the glossy white of my teeth. I was considering biting them until she mentioned the possibility I might not be turned over to the police. Hector snapped a handcuff on my wrist. He then released the trap biting into my fingers.

Just in time, a track policeman dashed up with a, "Hey, here! What goes on?"

The girl whispered in my ear, "Play along. Let him do the talking. You may get out of this."

I got out of it, all right. Hector told the track policeman he was a F.B.I. agent and that he had just arrested me. The girl showed the

uniformed guard a couple of identity cards—flashed them in front of his nose, and the idiot believed them.

The next thing I knew, I was hustled out of the track and put in a car. The girl drove. Hector and I sat in the back, handcuffed together.

"Okay," I said. "You can take the bracelet off."

He was fumbling in his pocket.

"Sure," he said, and suddenly stuck a needle in my arm.

I said, "Why you dirty—"

I didn't remember anything more until I woke up handcuffed spread-eagle in a motel with tape over my mouth. It was the next morning. In fact, it was nearly noon. I lay patiently a few moments and then I began to bounce angrily on the bed. It brought Hector in from the other room.

He stood there inspecting me. I was furious. Finally he reached down and removed the tape on my mouth.

"You're a rat!" I spit at him.

His tongue came out to where I could just see it between his lips. I came to know the gesture as indicative he was plotting no good for me. I remembered he did it earlier, at the bar.

"What do they call you?" he asked.

"John Doe," I told him angrily, then added, "You're a *filthy* rat!"

"By what comparison?" he asked.

He asked to be compared to a rat, so I willingly told him: I said he looked like a rat, he smelled like a rat, he had the mannerism of a rat; I theorized he descended from rats, and I offered to wager he slept with rats.

I heaved a deep breath and asked, "Okay. What's your pitch?"

He grunted and then started unlocking the cuffs on my feet. "We admired your performance yesterday," he said. "You're not bad for such a dummy."

"Listen?" I said, as I watched him undo my hands. "If I'd suspected a trap in your pocket, I'd still of swiped your wallet."

"You're bragging," he said.

I sat up and rubbed at my wrists. Hector was watching me to see if I'd take a swing at him. Which, I admit, I wanted to, but, I knew I'd wind up with a broken arm or worse.

"The day will come," I threatened, "when I teach *you* a trick or two. I've promised myself."

"I tremble," he scoffed. "Anyway, your operation amused Miss Hendricks."

"She the girl?"

He nodded. "Adella Hendricks. She sent the two men who tapped you on the stairs. The ones you took your wallet back from, plus both of theirs—"

"You're lying," I said. "They had a fight."

"You're easily fooled," he said contemptuously.

I reached for a cigarette so I

wouldn't reach for his throat. Then I walked inside the bathroom without answering him. He waited for me. When I came out I asked, "Why the devil did you trap me? You did it deliberately!"

"With help," he temporized. His pig eyes stared at me. "You understand I'll break your neck if you try and run away?" I nodded. Then he nodded. "Now I'll tell you," he said. "Miss Hendricks, you may be surprised to hear, is an expert pickpocket."

"She is?"

"Yes. She designed the trap in my pocket that grabbed you. In fact, she set the trigger while you carelessly avoided looking at us."

"But, why? I don't get it?"

He said, "She spotted you during the third race. We watched you operate."

I protested that they couldn't have. He snorted. "She said you were good. Very good. Myself, I think you're lousy. Only the stupid are caught at their own game."

I let the crack pass. Needless to say, Adella Hendricks now intrigued me with more than her looks. I wondered if jealousy was her motive for having me caught? As a woman, it could be some capricious vanity to motivate the fall of a rival? I've never understood women.

Hector said, "She thinks you may be her peer." I grimaced in spite of myself. No one in this world is even close to me. If I had known I was under observation by them, at the track, I'd have swiped the underwear off both of them. I can do it, too! Hector added, "She wants to see you."

I wanted to see her too. I had every intention of extracting a rightful revenge.

Miss Hendricks was in the other room. She was sitting comfortably in an upholstered chair, smoking a cigarette.

"Your technique is really good," she said.

I sat on the divan.

"Don't pout," she said. "I'm sure if the tables were reversed, you'd have trapped me. How is your hand?"

I flexed my fingers as Hector sat down beside me. "Nothing broken," I said. "Sore, but workable." I almost smiled at her. She has the type of dark eyes I like, and a smooth complexion; an upturned nose, a perfect mouth.

"We're with the F.B.I.," she said.

"So I heard," I answered without committing myself.

"How'd you like to help us?" she asked. Hector joined in.

"As government agents, we have to get a wallet from a man at the race track." I found it difficult not to laugh.

I looked at Hector. "What's the matter with her?"

Miss Hendricks did laugh. "The man knows me. I can't get near him, but you could. How about it?"

"What's in it for me?"

"A broken neck, if you don't," Hector said quickly.

Miss Hendricks stopped smiling. "No! You'd be doing your government a service. And, I'm sure you don't need money. Besides, we'll give you your freedom, not turn you in to the police."

I knew I really didn't have a choice, so I agreed. But they weren't fooling me. They weren't F.B.I. agents. Whatever the caper was, it was for reasons they weren't telling.

We took a taxi to the race track. Hector had box seats reserved in the clubhouse. He ushered us to the box and then excused himself. I sat down next to Miss Hendricks.

I didn't look around to see where Hector was. The hair on the back of my neck said that he was watching me from nearby. I considered the angles. Revenge can sometimes be too expensive. I figured I'd better swipe whatever guy's wallet they wanted, then go my merry way and forget them. I looked over to find Miss Hendricks regarding me coldly.

She pointed. "Down there," she said, indicating one of the owners' boxes in front. "The man using the binoculars. Maurice Lavella. He owns several horses. One of them will run in the handicap Saturday."

"So you want his wallet," I said, and stood up.

"Sit down." she said. "You wait for Hector!"

I sat down. She was beginning to rub me the wrong way, just like Hector. I wondered if I *could* cross them? Some intuition told me it depended on how good a pickpocket Miss Hendricks really was. I decided to con her into a test.

"You know," I said with a disarming smile, "it's my unbiased opinion you've rung me in because you're not capable—"

Wow! I said the right thing. Her eyes narrowed with furious anger.

"Oh, really!" she breathed out.

"Really! You need me."

"Only because Lavella knows me!" she flared back. She suddenly stood up. "Come on. I'll show you something."

I followed her quick steps up to the landing. It was crowded with people getting to the betting windows. She stopped and turned to me. "Pick someone."

I nodded at a hefty man studying a racing form. She walked by him. Close, by him. Then, with an impudent glint in her eye, she returned to me. She cocked her head in a motion for me to look down. There, trapped on the bulge of her

curved hip and held there by her over-sized purse, was the guy's wallet. She slipped it to me.

"Put it back," she ordered. So I did. There was nothing to it.

"Satisfied?" she asked, when I returned.

I batted my eyes at her like I was giving out admiration. The glare went from her face; she could turn hot and cold faster than any woman I've met.

Miss Hendricks was a capable pickpocket, but not in my class. While she reveled under my false appreciation, I was taking her to the cleaners on the way back to our chairs. I was going thru her purse. She was wearing a large bag which hung loosely from her by shoulder straps.

I smugly rummaged the whole purse before we got back to our seats. She had plenty of female junk but one item opened my eyes. A gun!

It was a small gun and it bothered me. After we sat down I debated skipping out on them and losing myself in the crowd. I was looking at the large man she wanted me to tap, Maurice Lavella. He was obviously a rich man and the loss of his wallet shouldn't cause him a strain. Naturally, I had to go and wonder *why* they wanted his wallet? The trouble of asking yourself questions is, the next thing you want is answers.

Miss Hendricks seemed in good humor again, so I started out by asking, "How'd you spot me yesterday?"

She said she saw me pass by a guy whose coat was bulging with a stuffed wallet. Suddenly, after I passed, his coat was flat. She admitted she didn't see me get it, but I was the only one who could have taken it.

After that they followed me, watched me work. Even sent the two amateurs after me, hopefully thinking, if the bunglers could take me they might be able to take Lavella.

I asked about the trap in Hector's pocket. She grinned.

"I rigged it there when we decided to use you."

"I've never seen one," I told her.

"And, you won't. It's not a commercial item. I use it in teaching—" She stopped suddenly as though angry again.

"You teach pickpockets?"

"Forget it!"

"One question. What's Lavella's wallet got you want?"

She looked over my shoulder at Hector, who was slipping into his seat on my other side. "Absolutely nothing," she said.

Hector asked if I tried to make a run. She told him, emphatically, for my benefit, that I knew better. Then she said I was one of the best pickpockets she'd ever seen. She patted my hand.

"Don't worry," she told Hector. "He can do it. And why shouldn't he do his government a service?"

"And, avoid jail," I joined in.

We sat there and talked about horses after that. I happily cooperated, pointing out horses like any amateur. Miss Hendricks kept her head bowed in case Lavella should happen to turn, though I doubt if he could have picked her out at that distance. We must have appeared a congenial threesome.

The festive mood made it simple for me to reconnoiter Hector's person. I felt a gun under his armpit, a snub-nosed deal. I began to wonder about my future. Maybe their plan was to murder this Lavella guy and someway fix the blame on me. They were some kind of crooks, but a weird type I'd never encountered before. They weren't interested in money! All Hector was bent on was getting this Maurice Lavella's wallet.

Hector finally asked, "What do you think?"

She answered. "Like we planned. Timing is everything. He goes to the restroom after the third or fourth race—at least he usually does. Usually, he doesn't check his wallet from the time he leaves, until he gets back to his seat. John can get his wallet when he comes up the stairs."

She looked at me. "Give it to Hector immediately!"

Just as she predicted, ten minutes before the fourth race, Maurice Lavella, or whatever his name is, left the box below us. He came up the stairs. Miss Hendricks hid her face behind a racing form as I wondered whether to risk getting shot.

Lavella is a large distinguished man. He was wearing a light blue summer suit on the warm day. It was a one-button affair. My practiced eye identified his wallet to be on his inside coat pocket. I decided it was no time for rash decisions.

As Lavella approached, I stepped past Hector. I pretended to study the racing program in my hand. I walked up three of the steps with the handsome Maurice Lavella, then suddenly paused. After a moment's hesitation, I doubtfully returned to my seat. Hector looked bloody daggers at me. I smiled.

"Are you sure of number seven?" I asked.

Miss Hendricks was more violent. She smashed her heel on my foot which quickly sat me down.

"Did you miss?" she said. She inhaled a breath and spoke very loud, so others could hear. "Yes! Number seven. Hurry!"

As I rubbed my foot I noticed that neither of them reached for a gun. I straightened and grinned as I spread my program on my lap. Finally, in a cute way, which annoyed Hector to the limit, I flashed the program aside and revealed Maurice Lavella's wallet between my knees.

Hector snatched the wallet from my lap. But to my amazement, he didn't search it. He unbuttoned his

coat and used it for a shield around his lap. When I leaned over to see what he was doing, he smashed my other foot with his.

I tucked my feet back out of the way and took another look. Hector growled, but he kept working on the wallet. Miss Hendricks hissed threats; even tried to distract me with a generous show of legs, but I saw what he was doing. Hector's nimble fingers were removing the stitching from one end of the wallet.

I admired the speed with which he worked. He knew what he was about. As soon as he got the end opened, he ran his finger in to open up the space between the lining and the outside. Then, to my amazement, he stuffed three clips of microfilm in it.

He didn't try to hide the action from me after that. He neatly stitched the wallet back up, just like it was. Then he stood up.

Hector exchanged a meanful glance with Miss Hendricks and then looked at me. "Come on! Let's go," he ordered. "Before he checks for his wallet."

I followed Hector to the clubhouse restroom, which was near our box seats. So, thought I, we are going to return Lavella's wallet?

What kind of a swindle idea is this? Are they going to frame the man? Then I remembered the story about Lavella in the racing form. He was taking his stable of horses to France soon. Hector and the girl could be using him to transport some highly secret information.

I further pondered that Lavella might be some kind of a secret agent. If he were, he'd be working on our side. That meant Miss Hendricks and Hector were a pair of spies. That didn't leave me in an enviable position.

I puzzled what to do as we pushed through the crowd on our way to the restroom. I stayed close to Hector. He seemed to prefer it. Frankly, so did I. I wondered if they would swipe Lavella's billfold on the other side of the ocean and get their film. It was possible Miss Hendricks had previously taken Lavella's wallet on other occasions and that's how he knew her. It was undoubtedly some big operation.

We found Maurice Lavella washing his hands at the large circular wash stand. Hector slipped me the wallet and I walked up beside Lavella and began washing my hands. He didn't even glance at me. We both finished and used paper towels to dry our hands. Then Lavella tossed his towels in the basket and left. I winked at Hector.

"Done," I said.

"Good," he snapped back.

"Now, there's one more thing." I noticed his tongue was barely visible between his lips as he studied me. "We wait," he said, "until Lavella gets back to his seat."

"Good idea," I said.

"Part of the plan," he said suspiciously.

I shrugged boredom and looked away. But, I was anything but bored. I'd pegged Hector right. He was an enemy agent and I knew what would be next—eliminate me! And I knew why he was keeping me in the deserted restroom. He was waiting for the fourth race to start and the noise from the crowd. But, if I made a run now, he wouldn't wait. Suddenly, the starting bell rang!

The announcer's voice came over the speaker in the restroom: "There they go!" he shouted, and the crowd roared.

Hector had his back to me. I watched him, fascinated. He waited a few seconds for the roar to reach the heights. Suddenly he jumped with an acrobatic half twist to face me. It was a neat, fast action move, like a bouncing hunk of rubber. I saw the snubbed-nosed revolver in his hand.

I expected Hector to say something before he shot me. Like, "Sorry, it's necessary." Or, "So long, sucker." But there wasn't so much as an interested expression on his face. He just didn't care. I stared back at his cold eyes as he perfunctorily pulled the trigger; not once, but repeatedly.

I pulled Adella Hendricks' little gun from my pocket and discovered Hector had eyelids! He blinked.

Hector frantically snapped his gun at me, trying to get the thing to fire. Of course, his gun couldn't fire. I had removed the bullets from it while we were on the way to the washroom. Five seconds! That's all it took.

I just meant to keep Hector at bay and escape. But, he threw his gun at my head. It came with the speed of a missile. I proved to Hector I wasn't the slow-witted fool he assumed. I can move.

I dodged his thrown gun with a speed I'm sure surprised him. But I never got a change to verify it. He charged me. Muscled like he was, he could break my neck. So, I shot him. Twice, in the head.

With Hector completely dead, I wondered what to do with Maurice Lavella's wallet? I could hardly hand it back and say, "I'm a pickpocket. After I took your wallet, these bad people put microfilm in the lining—"

First thing I did was to get out of the restroom. I emptied Miss Hendricks' little gun of bullets and wiped it clean of prints. I still had her to deal with even though I

wanted Lavella to know what was going on.

I watched the finish of the race from the top landing. I recognized a man in a checkered coat who had an aisle box fourth down from ours. I took his wallet as I followed him back to the seats.

Miss Hendricks looked at me with open eyes. She twisted in her seat to look up the stairs for Hector. I used her distressful moment to return her little gun to her purse. I even used her handkerchief to wipe off where I last touched the gun. And, I also deposited the checkered-coat man's wallet safely in her purse.

Miss Hendricks was very upset. "Where is he?" she said.

"We couldn't find Lavella," I lied. "Hector's still looking for him."

"The fool!" she stormed. "Lavella is back in his box!"

"He must have placed a bet, rather than going to the restroom," I explained.

It suddenly dawned on me that Miss Hendricks was in charge of the show, not Hector.

"I'll go put Lavella's wallet back," I offered.

"Wait for Hector!" she snapped.

"Okay. But, Lavella might feel for his wallet."

She gritted her teeth. "Damn! Go ahead."

I got up and walked slowly down the steps. On my way, I tore a piece off my program. I wrote on it: *microfilm stitched in the lining!* Then I removed the money from the wallet and tucked the note in its place, very neatly.

Maurice Lavella was in his owner's box with friends. Clubhouse patrons aren't supposedly allowed there.

But, before an usher could stop me, I suddenly rushed in, smiled my way past his friends and grabbed Lavella's hand.

"Great string of horses you have," I told him. "Especially the spotted ones."

Lavella gave me a puzzled smile and let me pump his arm twice more before he retracted it. He said, "Thank you," and then an usher invited me to leave. I did. Lavella had his wallet back. I waved to him as I climbed the stairs. He waved back and then shrugged at his friends.

Going up the stairs, I was delighted to see the checkered-coat boy in his box. I stepped into his box and shook his surprised fat hand.

"Don't look around," I said suddenly, which startled him. He swallowed and blinked at me. I leaned close and whispered. "I don't wish to get involved, but I saw a young woman deliberately steal your wallet!"

The portly fellow's hand flashed to his pocket like he was on fire. He lumbered to his feet. "I'll get the police!"

"Keep calm," I said. "It's the

young woman in the aisle box four tiers above us. Dark blond in the tan dress. Now listen! I'll go up and talk to her, keep her distracted. You get the police and circle around. Come down from the top. Can't let her get away?"

"No!" he said. He ran for the uniformed track guard down below.

I climbed the stairs. Before I got to her I saw that Miss Hendricks had been watching me.

"Why did you talk to him?" she demanded.

"He asked me about Lavella's horses. I had to be polite. Don't fret. I put Lavella's wallet back—"

"I saw that!" she stormed. "Get up! We're going to find Hector right now!"

I was reluctant to leave. She suddenly prodded me in the ribs with her little gun. She had it covered by the form chart. I got up and walked slowly as I could. She and the gun stayed glued to me as we climbed the stairs.

At the top of the landing, four policemen came from nowhere to surround us. The man in the checkered coat was on one side, wildly pointing at Miss Hendricks.

"Watch out!" I shouted. "She's got a gun." I really hollered it out. It stopped everybody.

Before I could move, I felt the empty click of the little gun against my ribs. After that, there was the most beautiful mad scramble I could hope for. Miss Hendricks helped me. She unwittingly, and furiously, brought her gun out in the open and began clicking it.

First at me, and then at everybody. I took off running. So did the fat little man in the checkered coat. He was hard to pass. When they found her gun wasn't shooting anybody, the police reversed directions and closed in on Miss Hendricks.

I chuckled as I dashed for the tunnel leading to the infield. I could grab a cab on the other side and leave the track, which I promptly did. There were two others who could pot shoot me and I wasn't going to miss the cover of the confusion. I didn't see them around, luckily.

But I was amused how surprised Miss Adella Hendricks was going to be when she learned it was her gun that killed Hector Van Zandt in a man's restroom. The police, too, for that matter.

The papers the next day said a woman pickpocket had been arrested. That was all! The whole story was hushed up. I never could find anything more about it. I've always wondered if I should have done something about their two confederates. But, I rationalized, they were amateurs. Besides, we pay taxes for law enforcement to take care of such people.

It's not my worry, really. I have a living to make.

THE CITIZEN

by

STEVE APRIL

Sometime to any man it may come, the split-second chance to run away from danger—or be a dead hero.

WE HAD TO drive into town, although I hate bucking the Saturday traffic. Marge, my wife, has this trouble of some kind in her right ear and needs a hearing aid—a $185 kick in our punchdrunk finances.

I let her off on 59th Street on the East Side, told her, "I'll meet you on this corner at three. Hon, be here ahead of time. There's no place to park and the cops hand out twenty-five dollar tickets for double-parking. Okay?"

Marge grinned. "Stop shouting, Henry. I have my good ear turned toward you. Make it four o'clock. I want to do a little shopping while I'm here."

"Marge baby, take it easy. You know what this hearing device will cost us and—"

She placed a slim finger across my big mouth. "Henry, I know, I know. I'll only window shop, won't even spend an extra penny."

"Okay." I blew a kiss at her as the corner traffic cop gave me a sour glance, and I drove off. It took me a half hour to find a parking spot farther uptown and even then it was 11:45, meaning I had over four hours to kill.

I walked down to 42nd Street

and the West Side, figuring I might take in a foreign movie: half the time I don't understand what the story is about but the girls are always beautiful and their dresses are never a big item on the movie budget. But I didn't see anything worth investing a buck in, considering how tight things were with us.

Strolling over to the Hudson River, I sat around the docks, watching some ocean liners leaving, wishing I could take Marge on a cruise, away from the rut I was in. Everytime we managed to get even a few dollars ahead something popped up, like this hearing aid. Or the car breaks down, the TV tube blows.

I wasn't kicking, you understand. We were happy and making out, but we just can't escape being on the brink of debt.

I sat there, day-dreaming, until a liner sounded its deep horn and I looked at my watch. It was almost three, time for me to start to amble back and pick up Marge. We had seen an ad for a hearing aid, some company on the west side of town, for $192; I almost wished Marge was buying that one: bucking that crosstown traffic would be murder.

Walking through this quiet street, towards Broadway, I passed a couple of old women staring at a small office building across the street. I heard one of them say, "Here comes the officer now. I'm glad he got that punk!"

I saw a young cop walk a burly joker out of the office building. The cop had the burly guy's hand doubled up behind his back.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know for sure, but we heard some woman went into the building, not knowing most of the offices are shut on Saturdays," one of the old women told me, "and that thug tried to snatch her bag. She got to a hall window and screamed. Lucky for her the policeman was walking by. I tell you, even in broad daylight you're not safe today. It's terrible!"

The cop and his prisoner crossed the street to a parked car, ordered the punk to lean over the hood as he frisked him, found an ugly hunk of lead pipe in the goon's hip pocket. The baby-faced cop said, "Okay, stand up and keep your hands in sight. Should be a radio car coming through this block any minute."

All this was happening a few feet from me and the old women. I saw the punk glance across the office building; you didn't have to be a mind reader to know what he was thinking—he'd like to get his mitts on the woman who'd screamed.

The cop kept looking down the street and the thug asked, "Okay if I scratch my neck, officer?"

"Go ahead and scratch, lousy," the cop grunted, eyes on the street.

The goon pulled this long thin knife from inside the back collar of his windbreaker and in a split

second he had stabbed the cop in the back, kicked him in the stomach as the cop sank to the sidewalk.

I heard the old girls gasp with horror. You know how it is in an emergency; time stands still.

I held this small debate with myself. As a citizen, as a human being, I knew I ought to help the wounded cop. That's what one part of my numbed mind told me. The other side argued, "Don't be a jerk. You can get yourself hurt, maybe killed. Mind your business; don't get involved.

"But this punk is starting to cross the street. He may kill the woman in the building who yelled for help? I can't cop-out on a woman."

"Cop-out is right. It's the cop's job, not yours! You want to die a hero, stupid? What's the woman to you? You don't know her! Mind your business and you won't get into trouble."

One of the old women moaned at me, "Do something! He'll certainly kill that woman in the building if he ever finds her!"

The second biddy gasped, "Help that officer! He's hurt bad."

"Is there a police call box around?" I heard a deep male voice ask, my own.

"I'll find a phone but *you* stop that horrible beast *now!*" the first old lady said.

One side of my brain said, "A big deal! Like in the army when the officer tells you to go out and draw the enemy fire and all the time he's safe behind a tree. Forget these old babes."

I'm not much of an action type but somehow I couldn't stand still and watch the cold way the knife punk was walking toward the office building.

I found myself running across the street. The thug whirled, bloody knife flashing in the sun. He snarled, "Keep out of this, or I'll give you what I gave that cop!"

I stopped short, circled and then dived for his legs, although it's been a lot of years since I was a sandlot football guard. I felt something cold against my legs as he toppled over me and we both hit the street. I took a knee in my thigh and a clumsy punch on the head before I got my elbow over his throat and pressed, as we thrashed around.

I wondered where that knife was. The thug was still and I heard the sound of rushing feet and then I was pulled off the goon by a cop. The punk was out cold, face ashen-pale. The cop cuffed him while another officer was bending over the bleeding cop.

As I stood there, panting, the cop pulled the handcuffed punk to his feet and threw him against the car he'd first been frisked over. The old women were both talking like mad, telling the cop what I'd done. Picking up the knife, the cop said, "There's an ambulance on the way. Are you all right, mister?"

"Sure. He didn't get a chance to

—" I followed the officer's eyes down to my right leg. The knife had ripped my pants open from the knee down. I felt my leg. It wasn't cut. Staring at my pants leg flopping in the wind, I started to curse.

The cop took out his notebook and asked for my name and address. I told him, still cursing si-

lently. More cops came and one of them ran into the office building and called out the window, "The woman's okay but she's fainted. Had a pocketbook chock full of money."

The cop talking to me said, "I want to thank you for helping the police, doing your duty as a citizen and as a—"

"Skip the duty bit. Look at my pants, my dirty suit. This is the only suit I have. It cost me sixty bucks. How am I going to work on Monday? Can you guys, the police department, get me a new suit by then?"

"No sir, I doubt if we can do that. But I know you'll receive a commendation from the police commissioner and—"

"Stop it. I can't wear a commendation."

"I'm sorry, buddy, but I don't think the department has a fund for buying clothes, or—"

"Officer, do you need me for anything? You have my name and address: can I leave now?"

"Sure. But there may be reporters and you'll get your picture in the papers."

I told him what he could do with my pictures and walked away, boiling mad. Not only was my torn pants flapping about like a loose sail, but there was this big grease stain on my coat and one lapel was ripped.

Okay, this wasn't my only suit. I do have a Sunday blue suit, but I sure didn't have money to buy another one. And what would Marge think except that I'd had a few drinks and got falling-down drunk, despite the fact I'd been on the wagon for over six months now? And I'd been lecturing her about not spending an extra dollar and all that!

People stared a my torn pants as I walked uptown, walking fast. What a dope I was! It would have been cheaper to have spent a buck on a movie. Be a good citizen, be a good idiot!

My suit ruined and all the police can say is I'll get some silly hunk of paper. And the woman who'd been attacked—the cop said she had a pocketbook full of money but she never even came out to thank me. And if I had politely suggested she pay for my suit, she

probably would have screamed again!

Maybe I was lucky. I could have lost a leg, be on the way to the hospital myself. And all for what? Some foggy notion of doing my duty? Man, I was getting old: one thing I had drilled into me in the army, *never* volunteer for anything.

Reaching the car, I sat in it for awhile, cooling off. I took out my pipe, only to find my tobacco pouch must have fallen out of my back pocket while I was wrestling in the street. That seemed the last straw. Starting the car, I knew I'd tell Marge right away, not give her a chance to lecture me.

I reached the 59th Street corner at quarter of four and was glad to see Marge waiting, reading a paper. As I opened the car door, I pointed to my torn suit. "Marge, I had a stupid accident, but don't bug me all the way—"

Marge put the paper down as she got in the car. One of her eyes was a puffed purple. Throwing herself in my arms she said hysterically, "Oh Henry, I had the most horrible experience. They'd sold out the one hundred eighty-five dollar hearing aids and weren't getting any more. Then I remembered this other company on the West Side with aids for one hundred ninety-two dollars. I went there but their office was shut. Suddenly a man came up behind me. I didn't hear him. He punched—"

"Take it easy, Marge."

"—punched me and tried to take my bag! I yelled and yelled and a cop came running in and I fainted but— Wait, this is the worst part I was told this thug stabbed the cop and *was coming back* to get me—kill me, I guess—when a passing man jumped him. I never even got a chance to thank the modest stranger. But tonight, when we visit the policeman in the hospital, I'll see if I can at least get the stranger's name. Hank, it was a nightmare!"

I held Marge tightly. "Easy. honey. Everything's okay. No need to cry."

"Don't you understand, if that man hadn't—"

"Baby, he did what any citizen should have done. Now stop talking about it and relax."

Marge nodded, drying her eyes on my sleeve. "I would have let the thug take the bag, but I knew how much the money means to us."

"Honey, don't talk about it."

"Yes. What's this stupid accident you started to tell me about, Henry?"

"Well, it really wasn't stupid. I mean, I ripped my pants on a nail and—"

The corner traffic cop growled like an enraged bear. "You two having a meeting over there, wise guy? Move on before I give you a ticket!"

"Yes sir, officer," I said, holding Marge with one arm and driving off—happily.

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PRIME TIME

It was a real cute trick, all right. Quite cute enough to murder an innocent woman . . .

by CARL HENRY RATHJEN

FIRE MARSHALL MANNING couldn't believe what he was seeing on the TV screen in his bachelor apartment. His red head came up from the chair back; his beer glass went down to the table; his stockinged feet planted themselves firmly on the floor. He was literally stunned.

Then anger began to smolder as he watched hands splicing wires. He distinctly remembered that, as technical advisor, he had ordered this sequence deleted from the TV tape. But there it was, a vivid detailing of how to rig a connection so that, when an intended victim innocently switched on a light or some other appliance, a few minutes later a heat coil would cause flaming explosion of a hidden container of volatile fluid.

Manning grabbed his telephone. A woman finally answered.

"Good Evening. Prime Time Television Productions—"

Cutting in, Ed Manning identified himself curtly. "I want John Sowersby. I don't care if he's got a tight shooting schedule and overtime costs. Get him on the line now."

"I'm sorry. He's gone out to late supper. May I take a message?"

"Tell him to call me immediately." Manning gave his home number. "And I don't mean tomorrow morning, but tonight."

Hanging up, he swore at the screen, which now showed a raging fire with screaming rigs responding.

The fire department wanted good public relations with producers, writers, and newsmen who requested technical assistance. So Manning had co-ooperated a few weeks ago when he was visited by

John Sowersby, TV producer for Prime Time, and his script writer. Surprisingly it was a woman, Rosalie Wynne, who ground out the melodramatic thrillers. They'd requested material about arson investigations.

Along with telling them that everything would have to be cleared through him, Manning had very definitely stipulated that there must be no detailing of how to set fires.

He gave them no information of that nature, but Rosalie Wynne dreamed up an electrical device for touch-offs.

When Manning viewed it on tape, he ordered that it be deleted or glossed over. They promised, appreciated his effort to co-operate with dramatic necessities in producing this particular tape featuring Malcolm MacGregor, the former thespian who now portrayed a super-super private eye called Johnny Super.

But they'd crossed him and left that sequence in. Manning swore again, wondering how many copies of the tape were leased out to other stations or going over coaxial cables. He'd get blasts from fire-fighting organizations for permitting his name to be linked to something like that, especially if a rash of electrically-caused fires erupted.

The phone rang. He snatched it up.

"Manning," he snapped.

It wasn't Sowersby. It was Manning's boss.

"Ed, I've just been watching TV—"

"So have I, Chief," Manning said. "You're calling about that primer for pyromaniacs, the Johnny Super show, Malcolm MacGregor."

"That's right," the Old Man said gravely. "How did that get on the air? Did that information come from your office?"

"Not with my knowledge," Manning said angrily. "I told them to delete it. I should have put it in writing, so I could prove that I ordered it."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Thanks, Chief."

"But others may not," the Old Man went on. "Now that you're aware of the situation, what are you doing about it."

"I've already called Sowersby's office. If that fink tries to avoid me I'll—"

"Keep me informed," the Old Man said.

Forty minutes after the TV program ended, the phone call from Sowersby still hadn't come. Manning changed into his uniform. He was tying a shoelace when the phone rang.

"Jack Sowersby," said a jovial voice. "The girl said you sounded angry. What's the beef?"

"Cut out the phony TV dialog," Manning said. "I've got two things to say to you for a starter. One, get that arson tape off the air—all stations—and keep it off. Two, don't

ever come to my office again requesting—"

"Re-run that," Sowersby protested. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't be so naive." Manning sounded off about the banned sequence, giving Sowersby no chance to argue or alibi.

Then a telephone operator's voice cut in. "Please excuse the interruption. I have an emergency call for Marshal Manning from the fire department alarm bureau."

"Hold it, operator," Manning said crisply. "Sowersby, wait in your office. Operator, put that call on."

The alarm bureau dispatcher said that Inspector Sims had radioed a request for Manning to join him at an address on the west side. Code Three, which meant red lights and siren.

Manning snapped off the apartment lights, grabbed his white cap and hurried out to the self-service elevator. As it went on up past his floor he could hear a man and woman laughing. He ran down the stairs to the basement garage, where he had two stalls, one for his official car, one for his own.

He wailed across town to an area of small frame homes. A policeman, diverting traffic, let him through. Ahead, among the spaghetti of hoselines, were enough rigs to tell him the alarm had been a two-bagger for a gutted frame bungalow and adjoining structures which had become involved. Exchanging his cap for white helmet, he buckled his turn-out coat as he hurried toward the scene. It looked as though the boys had it blacked down, except for chasing smoke wisps.

Inspector Sims, Manning's assistant, was questioning a group of citizens on a lawn. Spotting Manning, Sims came, limping from an accident years ago which had taken him out of action and which he sometimes tried to take out on others.

"One dead," he snapped. "Injuries in the neighborhood, mainly kids who were cut by glass when windows burst in over their beds from the explosion."

"What kind of an explosion?" Manning asked.

The inspector's smudged face contorted. "The kind that was blue-printed on TV tonight."

Manning felt a stabbing chill. Sims explained vehemently. "Gasoline, in a rigged container under the victim's bed, and shortly after she must have switched on her electric blanket—"

Manning cut in. "How did you know it was on TV tonight?"

"Everybody knows it by now." Sims chopped a hand toward sightseers. "If they didn't put two and two together, they got it when a rookie smoke-eater shouted to a pal it was just like he'd been watching before they'd been called out."

Sims glared at Manning. "If you

wouldn't be so damn co-operative when these producers and writers of lousy stories—"

Manning stiffened. "The victim didn't call it phony. Did you tell Miss Wynne how to rig an electrical source of fire?"

Sims met him eye to eye. "Anybody who says I did—"

"Skip it," cut in Manning. He frowned toward the gutted house. "Somebody had to get in there to rig it. Find out who may have seen him. Get all the details possible."

He was in the dead woman's bedroom—what was left of it—when chunky Ralph DeLong, sergeant, police homicide, joined him.

"Doesn't your department have enough fires without conducting TV seminars in how to set them?"

Manning answered through his teeth. "We got the idea from all the whodunits we've seen from police files."

DeLong's dark gaze pinned him. "Our cases always show them they can't get away with it."

"That will be the conclusion here too," Manning said. "With or without your co-operation."

DeLong nodded. "We've already begun the roundup of known pyros and deviates. The lab will get to work on the wire, resistance unit, and other physical evidence. Have you any suggestions for us?"

Frowning around, Ed Manning hestiated. "Later, maybe."

When he finally left the burned building he was confronted by reporters, radio and TV newscasters. Seething inwardly at their innuendoes, he parried their questions, then sought Sims.

"The victim," Sims said tersely, "was Eloise Haggerty, widow, in her middle fifties. Lived alone the past ten years. Married children up north and back east. Augmented Social Security widow's payments by doing house cleaning a few days a week, baby-sitting nights. She was a little fussy about neighbors' noise at night or kids running through her flowers. Other than that she got on with everybody. No beefs that might result in a retaliation like this. And, so far, no possible winesses of our suspect."

Manning felt doors of investigation being closed. He looked at his watch. Nearly midnight.

"It's late to try another angle. But you can start it and then give it full treatment first thing in the morning. We want to know who she worked for, house cleaning and baby-sitting."

Sims eyed him dourly. "To find out if she learned something an employer thought it too dangerous to know? You're clutching, Ed."

"Maybe," Manning admitted. He beckoned to DeLong, then spoke to the sergeant and Sims. "We're possibly looking for someone who knows electrical work, either professionally or as a hobby."

"He wouldn't have to know it that way after tonight's TV instruction," Sims said.

Manning continued determinedly, "He also had quick access to the materials used here—I mean the electrical stuff. The gasoline he could get anywhere, but he'd have to have quick access to the electrical makings. That is, if he got the idea from the program, then he'd have to get his stuff together, get into Mrs. Haggerty's and make the rig—all in a leeway of only about

a half-hour between the program and the explosion."

DeLong scowled. "Are you doubting that the program sparked this? Pardon the pun. You're suggesting that we ignore the pyros?"

"I'm not evading anything," Manning said. "I'm not overlooking any possibilities either."

Sims' teeth contrasted with the black smudges on his face. "And don't overlook the possibility of making Sowersby and that Wynne woman contributory accessories to this."

Manning didn't ask if he were included in that suggestion. "I'm on my way to see Sowersby now," he said.

Prime Time Television Productions was on the south side in a former factory converted to sound stages. The facade was a mass of billboards, brightly illuminated even at this hour. They extolled the sausage series ground out by the mill . . . *The Terror Hour* . . . *Hysteria* . . . *The Kook Family* . . . *Mayhem, Incorporated.*

The latter was produced by Sowersby, written by Rosalie Wynne, and starred Malcolm MacGregor. Manning noted that MacGregor's name had been reduced in size on the twenty-four sheet and now shared equal billing with the increased type size of the series' hero, Johnny Super.

Manning went in with mayhem on his mind. A public relations man waited by the reception desk which, in daytime, was held down by a calendar girl. The PR man tried to match her charm.

"Marshal, this was an unfortunate incident on the air tonight, and I'm sure we can count on you to be discreet."

"You can if you'll get out of my way and don't follow me—"

Manning went past him to a corridor of office doors. Most of them were open and the offices dark. At the far end light fell from a doorway in a slanting rectangle. As Manning approached he heard a ringing telephone and voices.

The woman's voice, firm yet pacifying, would belong to Rosalie Wynne. "Of course it's hack stuff, Mac. I know. I wrote it."

"Therefore," said Malcolm

MacGregor's resonant tones, with a slight roll to the "r's" and an assumed Oxford accent, "therefore, the dialog can stand improvement, and since I have deigned to associate my name with this trash—"

"Cut it," snapped Jack Sowersby as his paunchy figure appeared at the doorway. "We've got more important prob—" He feigned surprise at sight of Manning.

"Hello, Marshal," he greeted jovially, as though the PR man hadn't tipped him off via the phone. His graying sandy hair always looked on unfamiliar terms with a comb. His nose started down classically, then took out like a pointing finger. A short man, barely coming to Manning's shoulder, he extended a fish-belly hand out past his paunch.

"Put a rain check on it," said Manning. "After you hear what I have to say to you—"

Sowersby swung the unaccepted hand as though he'd originally intended it to gesture Manning into the office.

"I've already heard it, Marshal. By telephone and telegram from TV stations and fire departments, U.S. Forestry, insurance companies and—"

"Hi, Ed," said Rosalie Wynne, the tight blue dress making her look like a bottle with a blond stopper. She was an eye-stopper—too beautiful, Manning thought, to be hid from admiring eyes in the isolation that had to be a producing writer's life. How someone like that could dream up the melodramatic mayhem she did—

Malcolm MacGregor's soulful brown eyes merely regarded Manning. He would not speak until properly addressed or acknowledged. Manning gave him a curt nod, then stepped to one side to include Sowersby and Rosalie Wynne in his gaze.

"It's late and I'll make it brief, since you and Miss Wynne have been getting the blasts I'll be getting."

"Miss Wynne!" Sowersby echoed. "I thought you two were on first-name—"

"Jack!" Rosalie Wynne exclaimed. "We kicked him in the teeth tonight, remember?"

"That's cliché but apt," Manning said. "I distinctly remember receiving your promises about that sequence."

"Marshal," Sowersby said earnestly, leaning over his paunch, "We kept those promises. We shot a new sequence—"

"One that glossed over the technic," Rosalie joined in.

Malcolm MacGregor delivered his entrance line. "I'll vouch for that—" A dramatic pause, and then "—ab-so-lutely!"

Sowersby turned on him. "Damn right you'll vouch for it! You cost us plenty with rehearsals and retakes, all for a simple shot of the culprit's hands starting to make the gimmick."

"My hands," MacGregor corcected him. "My hands, to save you money in recalling the actor, so-called, whose face did not appear in that particular—"

"Let's skip your intramural bickering," Manning said. "All right. You claim you re-shot that scene."

"Finally," Sowersby muttered at MacGregor, and Rosalie Wynne nodded, sighing.

Manning went on doggedly, "and I assume you ordered it spliced in place of the other."

Sowersby pawed among a litter of telegrams, found a slip of paper and extended it.

"There's a copy of the memo that went with it after we got it back from the lab and ran it off. Rosalie and Mac viewed it with me in the projection room, saw me write this memo. That's why I got them down here tonight to confirm it, just in case you doubted—"

"I'm still doubting," Manning interrupted. "I want to know why that banned sequence went on the air tonight."

"For the life of me, Marshal," Sowersby said, "I can't explain it. I gave that sequence to the splicing department just before lunch. That afternoon the revised tape went to the lab for copying. While I've been waiting for you tonight, I've had everyone concerned on the phone, got 'em out of bed, away from parties, grilled them. And still no explanation.

"It's just possible that after lunch everyone in that department thought someone else had taken care of exchanging the sequences and so the tape went out unrerevised."

"Possibly," Manning agreed dubiously. "And it's also possible it was sent out deliberately. I intend to find out."

"Oh, come off it, Marshal!" Sowersby waved his white hands in exasperation. "You're going overboard to balloon a regrettable mistake into something way out of proportion to—"

"Me and how many fire departments?" Manning demanded, pointing toward the telegrams. "It's more than a regrettable mistake," he snapped. "Or don't you know that a woman died tonight by *that* little device a half-hour after your program went off the air?"

Rosalie Wynne gasped. Sowersby opened and closed his mouth like a dying fish. MacGregor's jerk of surprise would have been a credit to any ham. Manning gave them no time for startled questions. He went out to his car, drove to a phone booth and called police headquarters.

The round-up of known pyros and deviates was progressing and alibis were being checked out, but no prime suspect had been discovered so far. The crime lab, usually closed down at night, probably wouldn't make a report until late morning.

Manning went home and battled blankets and pillow.

At Headquarters in the morning there was a stack of caustic telegrams from fire departments and he received an acid phone call about an out-of-town pyro who'd been caught after setting a fire with the device. Sims called in to report he was going to complete the list of "straws," Mrs. Haggerty's employers. Manning filled in the Old Man on the investigation. The chief engineer tucked in his lips before he replied.

"All right, Ed. Look into every possibility. But keep in mind we don't want to be accused of seeking a scapegoat."

Manning went out to investigate a complaint about a fire hazard. His inner irritation almost prodded him into a lack of understanding that would have been more typical of Sims. Then he went to a school assembly to give a talk on fire prevention, and interpolated some remarks to the kids about letting TV interfere with homework.

The teachers thanked him effusively. Any other time he would have enjoyed their attention.

Back in the car and reporting his whereabouts to the alarm bureau, he was told to get in touch with Sergeant DeLong of Homicide. He drove to Headquarters.

DeLong waved to a report on his desk.

"From the crime lab. A copy went to your office too. It covers the type of wire, the coil used, et cetera, et cetera."

"Etcetera," Manning remarked dourly, "means you're still looking for something to work on."

DeLong gave him a look. "Did you have a row at breakfast? Sorry, I forgot. You're a bachelor. So maybe I shouldn't ask."

Manning reached for the report and began to scan it. DeLong offered a cigarette.

"I remembered what you said last night about the availability of electrical supplies. So, since I've had reasons to beef in the past the same as you have now, I got a little spiteful and it paid off—maybe."

Manning looked up. DeLong nodded.

"The wire used at Mrs. Haggerty's could be the same as is available in the electrical department at Prime Time."

Manning leaned forward. "What about the resistance unit, the coil?"

"A good question," DeLong said slowly. "They had one to use in that sequence you failed to ban. It can't be found now. Could have been tossed in trash." He shook his head as Manning was about to interrupt. "It could mean a lot and mean nothing. I've asked the lab to see if they can tab the Haggerty coil as the same one from Prime Time. It's a blind stab."

Manning scowled. "That's all the more reason for Sowersby to come up with an answer about that sequence, if he can."

"I went into that too this morning," said DeLong. "That tape sat in the splicing department during lunch hour. Someone could have shifted it to give the impression the revision had been taken care of and it was ready to go to the lab for copying."

DeLong hesitated, then went on pointedly. "It could also have been nothing but a mistake."

Manning stood up impatiently. But now with the report on the wire and the coil—".

"The report proves nothing," DeLong said. "It only shows it's the same type and gauge of wire, which can also be purchased from hundreds of wholesale and retail outlets. They're being checked for recent purchases along with the coil. We're also trying to sweat something out of the Prime Time personnel, but so far all we're doing is getting ourselves in a sweat. We're still looking for pyros too. And it could also be that someone we don't know about just hatched into one after seeing that program."

Manning glowered. "I won't buy it that way."

DeLong sighed. "Look, Ed, I can appreciate how you're on the pin, but—"

"Stick the pin in your brain and make it come alive!" Manning retorted. "Sorry," he muttered. "That ignores the leg work you've been doing."

"Yeah, it makes them too tired to give you a boot for that remark." DeLong smiled. "What's on your mind."

Manning put his fist on the desk. "There was only a half-hour from the end of that program until the explosion and fire occurred. That's too short a time for what this job involved. Our suspect, unknown so far, would have had to get his materials together for the device, would have to get into Mrs. Haggerty's house, into her bedroom to rig it. And where was Mrs. Haggerty?"

"Home." DeLong squinted. "She could have been in the living room, watching TV, while someone climbed in the bedroom window."

"Did you find any evidence of breaking and entering?"

DeLong grimaced. "Your department let it burn up. That's the trouble with arson cases."

Manning didn't have to be reminded that he dealt with crimes that were the toughest to prove.

"I still say this job took too much planning to be done on the spur of the moment in the time available."

DeLong considered, then he shrugged. "You make it sound plausible, but it wouldn't sound good to the D.A. Even if we had a suspect to offer him, we've got no real evidence so far, no motive. Nothing but guesses and—"

The phone rang. DeLong answered. "Yeah? Right here." He extended the phone. "For you."

Manning took it. The call was from Sims.

"I hit pay dirt, Ed. I didn't get too far with Mrs. Haggerty's neighbors, but found a friend who knows all about her house cleaning and baby-sitting employers. Better brace yourself." He paused, then went on triumphantly. "Mrs. Haggerty did house cleaning regularly for Rosalie Wynne."

Manning was stunned. He'd always found it difficult to believe the fictional mayhem concocted in that beautiful blond head. He couldn't and didn't want to believe this, but he knew how Sims could dig. He spoke quietly.

"Did you learn what the beef, if any, was between Mrs. Haggerty and—"

"Not yet," Sims replied. "But it will fester up to the surface now when that Wynne dame tries to fictionalize her way out of this. She knew how to rig the device—she'd dreamed it up—and she works for Prime Time and could have snitched wire from them and—"

"Keep digging on motive," Manning said with restraint. He hung up, then reluctantly faced DeLong.

THEY FOUND Rosalie Wynne at the Prime Time factory. She and Sowersby were arguing again with MacGregor, who wanted to see and make changes in an upcoming script. Manning, DeLong, and another detective asked to be alone with Rosalie.

Sowersby sounded off. "What's up?"

"We've got a new script to submit," DeLong said dryly. "Beat it. If we want you for a conference we'll call you."

Manning closed the door. Rosalie looked from DeLong to him. Her eyes were knowing with sudden apprehension.

"I've written this scene too many times," she said.

Manning left most of it to DeLong, who first informed Rosalie of her rights. It was a verbose, repetitious session. Rosalie was shocked by the suspicion of murder directed toward her. She had difficulty finding answers. Some of them sounded like cliches. She admitted employing Mrs. Haggerty. She denied killing her. Yes, puzzled, a morning newspaper was regularly delivered to her home. No, she hadn't seen the story of the fire in the papers with mention of Mrs. Haggerty's name.

"You expect us to believe that?" DeLong demanded. "You wrote the script that detailed the method used to kill her. You were told last night by Marshal Manning that the same method had been used to kill a woman. Yet you had no conscience or morbid curiosity to look in the paper to see if—"

Rosalie Wynne turned to Manning. "You didn't mention her name last night."

Manning nodded uncomfortably. "But you still haven't an-

swered the question about your silence this morning, why you didn't reveal your connection with the victim."

Rosalie's shoulders sagged in dismay. "I know it looks bad, but you handed me a shocker last night, Marshal. I was so disturbed when I finally got home, I took some sleeping pills. I woke up late, just dashed down here where, if it weren't the police disrupting routine by questioning everyone about that tape, it was Mac asking to see a script or Jack moaning about what that banned sequence had got us into. I didn't have time to look at a paper. Can't you believe that?"

She looked straight at Manning. His face felt warm.

"Let's shelve that for the moment," he muttered. "When did you last see Mrs. Haggerty?"

"So now I need an alibi!" she said. Manning forced himself to look at her, trying to forget the memory of sessions advising her on

last night's script, and some non-advisory.

DeLong broke up the painful moment.

"When did you last see the victim?"

"Four days ago, her regular cleaning day. I was working at home that day. Not alone," she said tartly. "Mac, was there, reading scripts, suggesting changes as usual. Jack—Jack Sowersby—also dropped by for lunch. Both of them, but especially Mac can tell you Mrs. Haggerty and I were on the best of terms. He can tell you that, despite my having to meet a deadline, I stopped work to help Mrs. Haggerty look for her lost keys, then I phoned a locksmith to pick her up and get her into her house where, she had extra keys—"

DeLong pointed to a purse on Rosalie's desk. "Is that yours? Open it. Get out your keys. Dump everything out."

Rosalie gaped, then spoke indignantly. "You don't mean to imply that if I were guilty as accused, which I'm not, that I'd be so foolish—"

Manning, hating himself, spoke up. "Empty it, Rosalie."

She identified every key in her purse. DeLong shrugged.

"On your way down to be booked, you can jog your memory about where you ditched Mrs. Haggerty's keys."

"Wait," said Manning, frowning. He drew DeLong out to the corridor. He spoke softly. "I'll agree she looks like a suspect, but I can't believe—"

"It's circumstantial," DeLong admitted. "We've still got to get the motive, get factual evidence, if possible. If we can find that key and link it to her—"

Manning grasped his arm. "I'm trying to keep my personal feelings out of this. But naturally I was looking for possible loopholes for her. I see one. Didn't you spot it too?"

DeLong stared, waiting.

Manning looked at him intently. "You didn't say it, but you inferred that Mrs. Haggerty's keys were not lost, that they were taken deliberately with this job in mind. Two other people had a chance to take those keys. Sowersby and MacGregor."

DeLong sighed. "There are two things I hate about arson cases. One, the evidence usually gets burned up. Two, you usually burn me up with some complicating factors. What possible motive would either of them have toward Mrs. Haggerty?"

"Do you need that now?" Manning retorted. "You were going to book Rosalie without one."

He opened the door and stepped into the office.

"Rosalie, don't ask questions, just answer them. Did Mac or Sowersby have a chance to take Mrs. Haggerty's keys?"

Anticipation crowded the angry apprehension in her eyes.

"Mrs. Haggerty always left her purse in the kitchen. I was in my writing room most of the time. Yes, either of them could have—"

Manning had enough on that subject. "Outside of their meeting Mrs. Haggerty at your home, do you know of any other association either of them may have had with her?"

Rosalie thought a moment. "Absolutely none that I know of."

Manning frowned. Blind alley. Or was it? He tried another approach.

"What's this argument you and Sowersby are always having with MacGregor about scripts?"

Rosalie hesitated before she answered. "Mac can't forget what he used to be in the theatre. He's always trying to take the soap and horse out of our operas, always insisting on revisions, rehearsals, rehearsals, rehearsals. I'll admit we can stand a lot of improvement, but not in this mill. We haven't got the time nor what it costs. He creates too many problems, and he's begun to suspect that Jack and I are going to write him out of the series and try to get front office approval of our plan. Jack talked me into—No, I've said it all."

"Thanks," Manning said. He and DeLong went out again.

DeLong shook his head. "You know, of course, that she could have seen you were offering her an out if she could swing suspicion toward them."

Manning replied dryly. "You heard her go out of her way to give them a previous association with Mrs. Haggerty? I think I've got it. That lack of previous association may be our answer, our motive." He went to the calendar girl at the front desk. "I want to see Mr. Sowersby and Mr. MacGregor. Don't call them on the intercom. Just tell me where to find them."

DeLong resignedly followed Manning to Stage Eight in a corner of the factory, where Johnny Super, impersonated by Malcolm MacGregor, had tracked a "bad" man to his lair. This lair was the "attic" arsenal of a cornered bank robber. Sowersby, sweating, was assisting the harried director. He waved his white hands.

"Whether you like it or not, Mac, this one is going to be a take." Turning to speak to the cameramen, he spotted Manning and DeLong approaching. "Now what the hell is the interruption?"

Manning didn't know what DeLong had planned, but he felt he was too close and too impatient to take it subtly. He spoke out bluntly.

"We came to ask you and MacGregor about Mrs. Haggerty and her house key."

"What's Rosalie's house cleaner got to do with us?" Sowersby shouted.

Manning left him to DeLong and moved toward MacGregor, whose

hand rested on a table loaded with the "robber's" arsenal.

"Where do you keep the mementoes of your performances, Mac? Let's see if you made the mistake of keeping Mrs. Haggerty's house key."

MacGregor appeared about to protest; then he grabbed up a tommy-gun. "Stay back!"

Manning, keenly aware he was unarmed, kept moving toward him. "Since when are stage props loaded with live ammo?"

MacGregor stepped toward the side door of the 'attic.'

"Stay back," he warned, cradling the gun at Manning. "I loaded it when I thought you might be getting close."

Manning still moved, despite knots in his stomach.

"You mean, my questions about the tape being deliberately sent out with the banned sequence? And that you surmised I didn't believe a pyro had time enough to be 'educated' and to pull last night's job with Mrs. Haggerty?

"You had plenty of time to get set, didn't you? Several days since you stole her keys while she was house cleaning. And sometime yesterday—we'll tie it together later—you got into her house while she was out and rigged the device so that when she went to bed last night after watching TV—"

The glowing gleam of desperation in MacGregor's eyes told him he was right. The eyes wavered slightly as MacGregor must have spotted DeLong or someone else moving to enflank him. He whirled and raced out the "attic" side door. Electricians fled before him.

Manning was right after him. MacGregor spun around. He swung the gun back for leverage to hurl it at Manning. The gun struck the wall behind MacGregor, struck a panel of switches for powerful currents.

A sputtering flash blinded Manning. MacGregor's stiffening and whipping body emitted an involuntary scream of electrocution. Sparks showered, setting fire to flimsy scenery. Manning dashed toward an alarm box and an extinguisher on the wall.

HOSEMEN from the rigs outside were taking up line. Truckmen were overhauling the burned stage and roof of the factory. The coroner's wagon was taking away Malcolm MacGregor. Newsmen were everywhere. DeLong finally got Manning alone in the office with Rosalie.

"Just so I can close the case completely, Ed, aside from my own curiosity. He didn't want to be killed out of the series, instead he blundered into an exit where he couldn't hear the applause. That was his motive, but I still don't see where Mrs. Haggerty comes into it."

Manning looked at Rosalie. "I think he planned to do the same

thing to Rosalie and Sowersby, so they couldn't approach the front office about getting rid of him. We'll probably never know, of course, but I think it fits with everything else."

"It still doesn't fit with Mrs. Haggerty."

"I began to get an inkling of how it fitted when you were questioning Rosalie." Manning tried to swallow the bad taste in his mouth. "Mrs. Haggerty was an innocent victim, very innocent." Manning gave up on the bad taste. "MacGregor was an actor, always insisting on rehearsals."

Rosalie Wynne gasped, getting it. Manning nodded grimly. "The lousy ham, planning to stage two murders, used Mrs. Haggerty for a dress rehearsal!"

"It fits," DeLong murmured, and added comments under his breath which would not have fitted any television script planned for family viewing.

A few minutes later, Manning and Rosalie were alone.

"Thanks, Ed," she said.

He smiled. "Partly just part of the job, like serving as technical advisor." He hesitated. "I'll be free tonight, if you feel up to collaborating on dinner and—"

"Seven o'clock," she said.

He went out to his car, thinking no arson and murder tonight. Just a moonlight mood and—just maybe . . .

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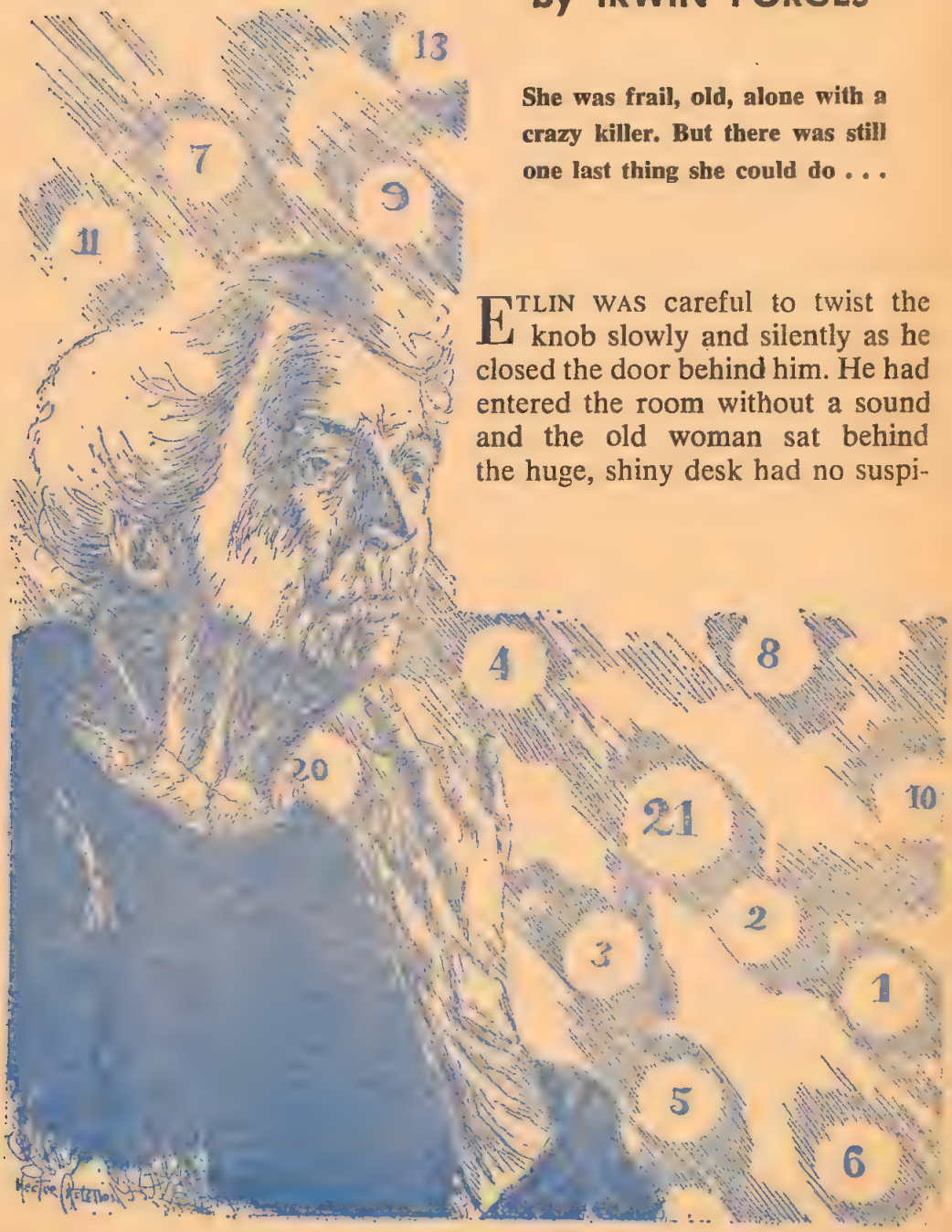
by ROBERT HART DAVIS

THE TWENTY-FIRST BUTTON

by IRWIN PORGES

She was frail, old, alone with a crazy killer. But there was still one last thing she could do . . .



ETLIN WAS careful to twist the knob slowly and silently as he closed the door behind him. He had entered the room without a sound and the old woman sat behind the huge, shiny desk had no suspi-

cion he was there. She had swiveled her wheelchair to reach for some papers when he spoke.

"Don't touch anything." His voice was soft, a little above a whisper. The words seem to catch and rasp slightly in his throat. It was this voice and the strange glow in his eyes that had brought terror to four women in the past two months.

The old woman lifted her head, bringing her eyes level with his, and he realized she was appraising him, her face calm and expressionless. Etlin was a little surprised that she showed no fear. This was the anticipated moment when he enjoyed the panic which distorted the women's faces when he found them alone.

Still, he reflected, there was plenty of time. It was always satisfying to drag these things out. The old lady would plead and cry like the others before he left the house.

Her hand remained poised in the air and she spoke.

"Why should I touch anything?" she asked. Before her the top of the enormous desk gleamed with the multi-colors of the numerous buttons arranged in a rectangular panel.

He shook his head and gave her a smile that was both amused and cunning. "I know about you. I made it my business to find out everything. You're the lady with the buttons. I've read the stories in the papers. You're very wealthy—just received the latest statement from the accountant. It's all here." She started to reach for the thick folder and he moved quickly with a hissing sound. She withdrew her hand.

"Don't try that again," he warned, his voice still soft and and choked. "I told you I know about you and all the buttons." His eyes flicked to the corners of the room. "You don't even have a telephone. You're in charge of the Longworth Corporation. When you want a person you press one of the colored buttons."

He waved a hand. "The person has to come running, doesn't he?"

"Yes," she said.

She seemed very old and frail, her cheek and jaw bones thrust against the thin, transparent skin of her face. But her eyes were alert and searching. The hand that rested on the arm of the wheelchair was creased with wrinkles, and in her neck the blue veins stood out prominently.

Etlin stared and thought that if he reached out to tighten his wiry fingers around her neck she would die very easily.

She pointed a finger toward the newspaper lying on a corner of the desk. "The story's in there again. I don't know how many times they've written me up. They never seem to tire of it. But after all, you can't blame them. Eccentric old lady—millions of dollars—boss of the Longworth Corporation."

Her eyes showed an amused

glint and she nodded toward the newspaper. "The reporter who wrote me up yesterday had a lot of fun."

Etlin bent closer to scan the paper, his eyes wary, his body ready to pounce if she made a movement. The black heading was a question: WHAT HAPPENS IF SHE LOSES ALL HER BUTTONS?

His eyes traveled quickly over the first paragraph and he didn't bother to read the familiar information beneath it.

"Why do you do it?" he demanded. "Why do you press buttons to make people come running?"

She seemed to reflect. "I've often asked myself the same question. I'm accustomed to authority, to taking charge of things. And I'm very capable." She sighed. "I have a son who should be able to take over. But I wonder, and I'm not certain—not really certain." She grimaced.

"Perhaps I just love the dominance and the power."

"Yes, that's it," he said, his voice rising. "You like to boss people, to treat them like inferiors." He was remembering his mother, and his whole body turned taut and menacing. She had insisted upon making all decisions for him, even when he grew older, as though he couldn't be trusted to decide the simplest things. He glanced about nervously, realizing that his voice had become strident.

He relaxed and spoke softly again.

"I never take chances," he said. "Everything is worked out. I've watched your place for days. You have two women and two men working for you. They've all left and you're alone in the house."

"Yes," she admitted. "My maid was suddenly ill and I sent her to

the doctor. The cook goes out to the market every afternoon. The chauffeur took the car for repairs and my secretary has gone into town to get something for me." Her eyes gleamed. "It could never happen again. All four of them. You're lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it," he said sharply. "I told you I always plan."

Etlin studied her, his face a mixture of puzzlement and annoyance. The old lady acted as though she were enjoying the conversation with him. So far he'd been unable to discover the tiniest trace of fear. Could she be up to something? His eyes darted about. Was there something he hadn't investigated?

He walked quickly around the room, going from one window to the next. All the windows were

closed, and outside he could see the heavy iron grilles fastened in place.

"There's nobody," she said, reading his thoughts. "We're all alone."

He moved close to the desk where the panel of buttons flashed and bent his face toward her.

"You're not afraid?" he asked.

She met his gaze without answering and he tapped the newspaper with one finger. "I'm in there too. You must have read about me."

She nodded. "Yes, I have. You've been in a number of times with big headlines. Let me see—has it been three or four women?"

His eyes shone and then were covered with a bland film. He twisted his voice innocently. "What about the four women?" he asked.

"Don't pretend," she said. "I know you're the one. You robbed them. And then you killed them."

He rested on the edge of the desk and grinned at her. "There's no proof. Absolutely nothing. I know. Nobody would ever suspect me."

It was not his nature to admit anything. But now he felt like boasting and after all, there was no danger. The old lady wouldn't be alive to tell anything."

"I killed them," he said. "There were four. The newspapers are right. Three young ones and an old one. Almost as old as you." He caught the flicker of her eyes and added hastily, "Don't think that I intend to kill you. Not if you cause no trouble and cooperate. You must have a lot of money and jewelry in the house. If you tell me where it is, I'll take it and go."

Her lips curled slightly. "You know you won't. You plan to kill me."

His eyes were mocking and the fingers of one hand opened and closed as though he were already clutching her thin neck, but his voice had a friendly, coaxing tone. "Why should I kill you? Tell me where the money is and I'll leave at once."

"What about the other women?" she asked. "Did you take their money and go?"

Sudden anger colored his face. "They made noises, screamed. I had no choice. I had to—do you understand?—I had to."

She sat silent, her gaze steady, and he was seized with a violent impatience. "Talk, talk," he said. "We've had too much of that. For the last time, where is your money?"

He moved around the side of the desk toward her and she turned her chair.

"If you kill me," she said, "you'll never find the money. What good will that do you?"

"There are ways," he said, grinning cruelly. "I can beat you or choke you until you tell."

She shook her head. "I don't think you can. First of all, you'd get nothing out of me. And secondly, I'm very old and not very well. I think I might die suddenly."

He stood rigid, fighting back his frustrated rage. His instincts told him she was right: nothing could be gained by force. He allowed his body to loosen, and as the shiny buttons caught his attention, he decided to make a pretense of being interested in them. He waved a hand toward the buttons.

"Who do they call?" he asked.

"People," she said. "A president, a vice-president and many others."

"Yes," he said. "I've read about it. You summon them as though they were errand boys." His voice swelled with pride. "I read carefully and have a habit of remembering the smallest things. I can even remember the number. They said you have twenty-one buttons. They said you were superstitious—you don't like even numbers. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," she answered. "You do have a good memory. That's what was printed." She smiled. "But you can't always believe the papers."

He frowned. "There was something about the twenty-first button. Something special." When she didn't respond he said, "Tell me about the buttons. I want to know what each one is for." He watched her hand lift and his muscles tightened. "But don't touch any of them. Do you hear?"

She sat motionless, and he bent to examine the buttons. They were arranged in rows of five with an extra one at the bottom. "They have no names on them," he said. "How do you remember which is which?"

"By the colors," she said. "Each color is for a different person. You see, I too have an excellent memory."

"The top," he ordered. "Start there."

She pointed. "The topmost one to the left is naturally for the President of the Longworth Corporation. Then there's one for the first vice-president and one for the second—"

"Three," he murmured.

"Yes," she said. "There's the general manager, the public relations officer, the advertising agency and—"

"Not so fast," he said. "That's six."

Her hand fluttered above the buttons. "Our secretary at the Longworth Building, the accounting firm, my lawyer, a line to the main factory, the head of our employment division, the—"

"Stop!" he said angrily. "I told you not to go so fast." While she talked he had prided himself on how alert his mind was, but now he wondered if he had lost count. "How many was that?" he demanded.

"Twelve," she said quickly. "Shall I go on?"

His eyes narrowed. "I counted eleven."

"I told you it was twelve. Do you want me to start over again?"

"Never mind," he said roughly.

He glared at her. Was she trying to prove she was smarter than he?

She went on. "The next five are all for our branch warehouses. That's simple."

"I see," he said. "Then that makes seventeen?"

"Yes. And to finish, there's my home secretary, the maid, the cook and the chauffeur." She leaned back. "Twenty-one in all."

"Twenty-one," he repeated softly. He stared at the buttons and then his face flushed with rage. "You think you're clever, don't you? Think I'm easy to fool. I was right in the first place. You've been lying. You've counted only twenty buttons. Why? Why did you skip one?" He thought hard, searching his mind for something he'd read.

His eyes lit up. "Of course—the twenty-first, the one at the bottom. I remember now. In the paper—there was something about it being very important. But you didn't say what it was."

She seemed amused. "Yes I wouldn't tell the reporter what it was."

"Tell me," he said. "I want to know."

She shook her head. "It's my secret."

He controlled his anger. After all, what difference did it make? He'd already decided to kill her even if she didn't tell him where the money was. There'd be a final payment for the way she had thwarted him.

"An old lady and a lot of buttons," he jeered. "Sitting at a desk and ordering people about like slaves. What good does it do you now? Who's going to follow your orders?"

He looked at her and was seized by a sudden impulse. Suppose a button was pressed? How long would it take before anybody could come—twenty minutes, a half hour? Too late to be of any help to her. His hand poised over the buttons.

"How would you like me to try one of your marvelous buttons?" he asked, grinning at her. He pointed a finger at the lowest one. "Let me see. Why not that terribly important one that has to be kept secret?"

He noted the disbelief in her eyes and his tone became contemptuous. "You think maybe I'm afraid." His finger jabbed into the button suddenly.

As he drew back she made a sudden movement and her hands tore violently at something beneath the desk.

"What's the idea?" he cried. "What are you doing?"

"I think I'm ready to answer your your question now," she said. "About button number twenty-one."

He had circled the desk and stood above her.

"I don't care about that," he shouted. "Tell me what you were doing."

She ignored the threatening motion of his hands.

"Twenty-one performs a simple task," she said calmly. "I always use it when I don't want to be disturbed. It locks the door."

His body twisted in panic.

"You're lying," he cried. He ran to the door and tugged at the knob, turning and yanking it.

She laughed. "You're wasting time and effort. You've locked yourself in. And there's no chance of breaking the door—it's heavy oak."

He whirled about to spring toward the desk. "Now I'm going to kill you," he choked.

"You were bragging about how you think and plan," she said. "Think now—think hard. You will be found here with a dead body. As far as the other women are concerned, nobody will be able to prove that you murdered them. In fact, a good lawyer might get you off. But if you kill me, all you can do is sit here and wait for the police to arrest you for murder."

He drew back slowly and stood silent, forcing his mind to be calm, to weigh all the possibilities. Suddenly he smiled.

"Of course," he said. "You almost fooled me. But if a button locks a door it must open it." He reached down to press the last button.

She leaned back and shook her head, the amusement again written on her face. "A few minutes ago I was busy tearing out wires under the desk. I believe I tore them quite thoroughly. In fact, I surprised myself. I don't know where the strength came from."

Etlin walked away to stand slumped against the window, his eyes fixed blankly on the cage-like pattern of the iron grille.

When the police arrived he fought furiously until they overcame him. He was dragged away screaming, "You can't prove anything. I haven't touched her."

She had been explaining to the lieutenant. "Naturally, I couldn't tell him what the twenty-first button was for. I'd been thinking feverishly and knew that it was my only chance to live. I waited and hoped that I'd get a chance to reach for it before he could grab my hand. I had it all planned to yank at the wires. Then he gave me the chance I was waiting for when he actually pressed the button himself."

The lieutenant shook his head admiringly, and then another idea occurred to him.

"But your son summoned the police," he said. "How could he have known what was happening?"

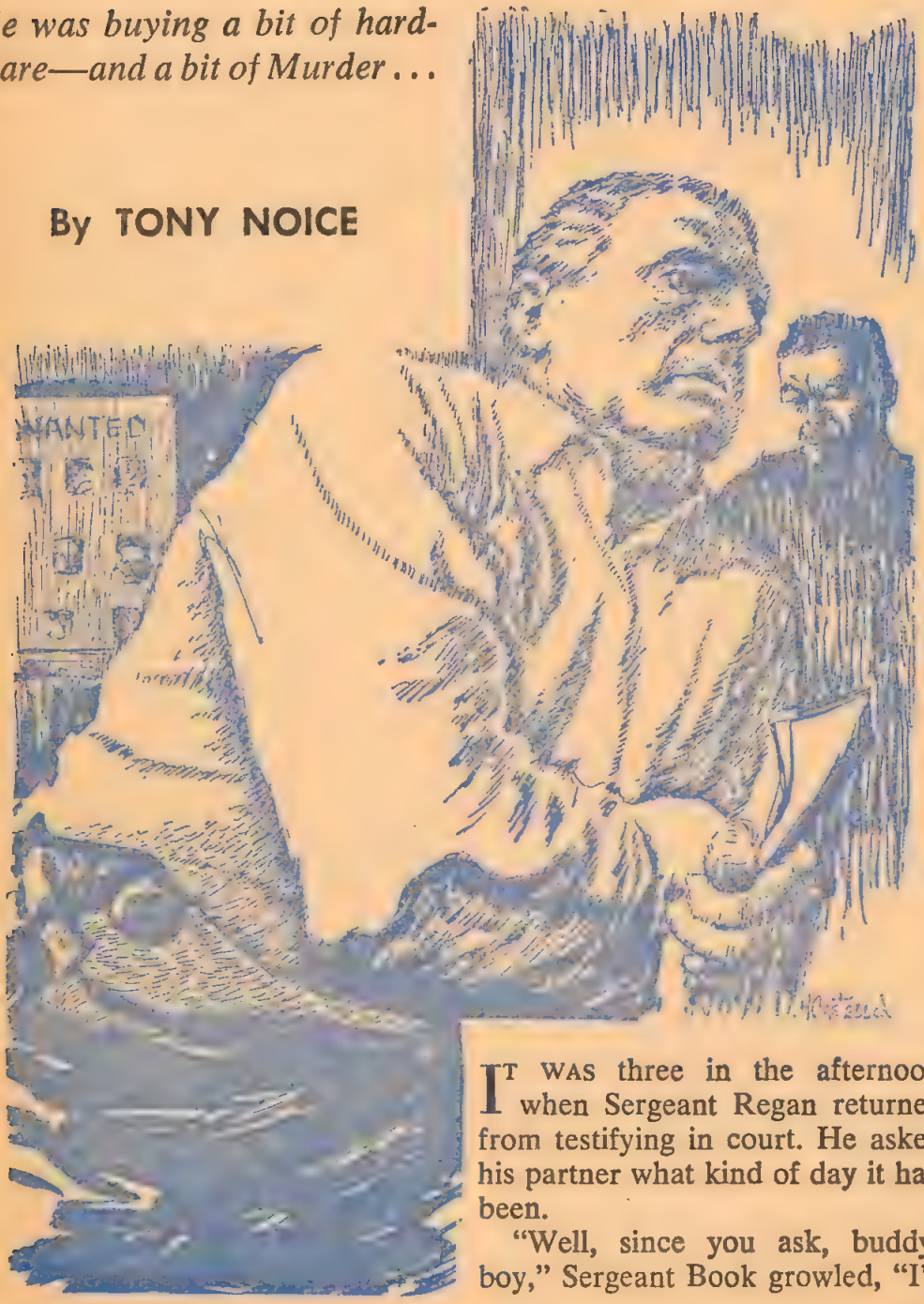
She smiled. "The newspapers were not completely accurate. I cautioned the man about that. I've always had twenty-three buttons. The other two were under the desk on my left. I pressed them soon after he came in. One of them started a tape recorder and a mo-

(Continued on page 144)

Two Things Are Certain

He was buying a bit of hardware—and a bit of Murder . . .

By TONY NOICE



IT WAS three in the afternoon when Sergeant Regan returned from testifying in court. He asked his partner what kind of day it had been.

"Well, since you ask, buddy-boy," Sergeant Book growled, "I'll

tell you. It's been a lousy day. I had a fight with my wife; the liquor tax went up to eighteen percent and the city sales tax went up to five percent. Oddly enough, those are the same percentages my son's grades and the stock market went *down*. And to top it off, we've got a murder with no leads and no witnesses."

Regan smiled. "Tell me about the homicide. The other problems you'll have to take up with the chaplain."

Book already had the file open. He said, "Here's what we've got, Frank. At twelve-fifteen today, an odd-job worker named George Spanos was found in his apartment with his head bashed in by a hammer. I guess he planned to put up a shelf or something, because the hammer and a lot of other tools were lying around.

"We have the exact time of death —twelve-twenty. His landlord happened to come for the rent while he was still alive, but claims he never regained consciousness. Since the building super accompanied the landlord the entire morning it looks like they're clean."

Regan asked, "Do we have the stuff that was found with him?"

"I was just getting to that." Book crossed the room and returned with a cardboard box. "It's all in here—saw, hammer, tape, hooks, wood. And look at this—an itemized receipt from the Jake Lubin Hardware Company. This hardware dealer may have been the last man to talk to Spanos, so I'm having him brought in for questioning."

Regan looked over all the items, checked them against the receipt. Nothing was missing.

Book continued, "We think we have the motive—robbery. Spanos hit the number this morning for six hundred dollars. Picked up the cash from the newspaper dealer who takes the bets around eleven-fifteen. Then, like a jerk, he goes into the nearest bar, has a couple of beers and shoots off his mouth about his luck to the bartender, a fellow named Kenney, and—"

Regan interrupted. "Maybe the bartender tipped off a friend."

"I already checked that out with the precinct boys. They all know Kenney and claim he's okay. Anyway, Spanos left the bar at approximately eleven-forty-five. I figure from there he went to the hardware store, blabbed some more about the money and—" Book's sentence was cut off by a buzzer announcing the arrival of Jake Lubin, the hardware dealer.

He entered and looked around with a mixture of wariness and contempt. A large man with arms that hung almost to his knees, Lubin was the kind of stranger mothers tell their children not to talk to.

Book ushered him into a chair, handed him a police photo and said curtly, "We'd like you to identify a customer of yours."

Lubin stared at the picture. He said, "He don't look familiar. You sure he is a customer of mine?"

"Not *is*—was. He was murdered today and this receipt of yours decorated the scene. Take a look. Maybe it will refresh your memory."

Lubin examined the slip of paper and said slowly, "Oh yeah, I remember now. He said the closet space in his apartment was lousy and that he wanted to put up a shelf and a clothes rod. Only came in that once—two, three days ago."

Book jumped from his chair. "Two or three days ago? We figure this morning, just before noon."

"Well, you figure wrong. So far today I've sold a couple of light bulbs and a small can of paint, that's all."

From his desk across the room, Regan said, "Mr. Lubin, there's a space on that sales slip for a date, but it's left blank. Are you always so careless?"

Without turning, Lubin said, "Look, business stinks. Most of my customers buy one or two things. I don't bother with a receipt. This guy got a half-a-dozen items, so I added them on that slip and put it in with the order."

"Doesn't your cash register figure the total for you?"

"It would if it was working, but it ain't. Like I said, if it's one or two items I add them in my head. More than that, I figure on the receipt and give it to the customer."

"So there's no way of proving just when this order was filled. Very convenient. Anyone else in the store when you took care of Spanos?"

"Let me think. No, I can't remember anyone."

Sergeant Book moved in close and said, "Well then, suppose you remember what you did today from eleven-forty-five to twelve-fifteen?"

"What I do every day. Stay in the store till noon, put the OUT TO LUNCH sign on the door, take a walk, grab a bite in a cafeteria and come back."

"Got any proof? Meet a friend, talk to anybody?"

"No, just walked around, had a sandwich and coffee and came back."

Sergeant Book shook his head and said, "Okay, Lubin. Wait outside."

When the door closed Regan said, "What do you think about it, Pete?"

"You know damned well what I think. Spanos walked in there this morning flashing his six hundred bucks. That was more money than Lubin had seen in a month, so he followed him home and did a little carpentry on his skull. But proof we haven't got."

Regan nodded and said, "Well, let's go over it again. Maybe we'll find something." He re-examined the tools.

Nothing. He turned his attention to the bill.

JAKE LUBIN CO.
Hardware

		Date
1	*Saw*	*$2.79*
1	*Hammer*	*$1.65*
4	*Hooks*	*$1.00*
1	*Tape*	*$ .69*
2	*Wood planks*	*$3.25*
1	*Wood rod*	*$2.65*
		$12.03
	tax	*$ .60*
		$12.63

Suddenly he stopped and grinned like a sweepstakes winner. To his partner, there was no mistaking that look.

"Okay, master mind," Book said, "What have we got on him?"

"Proof that he lied. Spanos bought the stuff this morning. With that as a lever we should be able to crack a certain Mr. Lubin wide open."

"What proof that he lied?"

"Lubin charged him sixty cents tax. That's five percent. Remember what you said when I first walked in? The city sales tax went up *today*."

The Twenty-First Button by Irwin Porges

(Concluded from page 140)

tion picture camera in the wall. I've had occasion to use these before."

She gave a throaty laugh. "You can see that a lawyer will have to be awfully smart to get this fellow off. The second button signals my son at his home."

She sighed. "You know, I've often wondered if I should turn the business over to him. I guess I've been unable to give up the power and excitement. But after today, well—" she leaned toward the lieutenant, her eyes direct and earnest. "When I pressed that button, praying that he would be home and would come, I made an oath that if he did, the Longworth Corporation would have a new boss."

Her hand rested on the colored discs. "Perhaps it's time an old lady loses all her buttons."

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